

HARLEQUIN WORLD'S BEST

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Risky Pleasure

Love in the Air

Shared Moments

Island of Dreams

JoANN ROSS

NAN RYAN

MARY LYNN BAXTER

LUCY GORDON

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JoANN ROSS

JoAnn Ross first broke into print writing feature articles, as well as a weekly humor column for several newspapers. A prolific writer with numerous awards to her credit, she is also Editorial Chairman of the *Romance Writer's Report*, the professional journal of the Romance Writers of America. Although JoAnn resides in Arizona, her native state is California, which she visits several times each year. JoAnn is married and the mother of one son.

NAN RYAN

Nan Ryan, born and raised in Texas, has lived literally "from one border of the United States to the other" and lots of places in between. Currently she lives with her husband in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, where she writes in her cluttered sun-room office and co-hosts "Atlanta Book Ends," a bi-weekly book review program on WVEU television.



MARY LYNN BAXTER

Mary Lynn Baxter is a graduate of North Texas State University, and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Library Sciences. In 1971 she fulfilled her lifelong dream of owning her own bookstore. Through her store, she developed friendships with quite a few romance novelists, and she became interested in the genre, eventually making it one of the store's specialties. She published her own first romance novel in 1982, and has never looked back.

LUCY GORDON

Lucy Gordon met her husband-to-be in Venice, fell in love the first evening and got engaged two weeks later. After seventeen years, they're still happily married and now live in England with their three dogs. As well as being the recipient of numerous awards for her romance fiction, Lucy was a writer for an English women's magazine for twelve years.



HARLEQUIN WORLD'S BEST *Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader:

Introducing...the new-look WORLD'S BEST ROMANCES!

This month, we've decided to update our cover design, to give it what we think is a fresher, more contemporary feel. We hope you like it too! And we've added "Star Signs," a regular new horoscope feature, to entertain you and to help you plan your life.

The important things haven't changed, however. Each issue will still contain four of the quality romance stories you have come to expect, from bestselling romance authors. Enjoy!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

P.S. Are you interested in more romance reading? We'll soon be offering you slightly longer romances, from the publishers of Harlequin books. Stay tuned for details!

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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JoANN ROSS

Risky Pleasure



Blair MacKenzie gladly gave up her successful modeling career to run Clearwater Hills Farm.

But was she putting her life in danger when she persuaded Clint Hollister to run it with her?



Jason Langley was dead.

The thought struck as harshly as the intense California sun flooding Clint Hollister's bedroom. Seconds later, the dull throbbing in his head reminded him of last night. At least he'd sent the old man off in style, although today was going to be rough enough without his having to face it with the granddaddy of all hangovers.

The ringing of the phone shattered his bleak thoughts. "Yeah?" he growled into the mouthpiece.

"Hollister?"

Clint groaned. "It's me, Blackwood. What do you want now?"

"I was calling to remind you of the reading of the will this morning. You are planning to attend, aren't you?"

"Look," Clint suggested, "why don't you just call me this afternoon and give me a rundown? After all, the whole deal is pretty cut-and-dried. Blair MacKenzie is the old man's only living relative. So she inherits the ranch, sells it to the highest bidder, and goes back to New York City."

"That's a tidy little scenario you're painting, Hollister," Ramsey Blackwood allowed. "But you may be in for a surprise."

"I should be. I was with Jason last month when he turned down an offer to sell the place. He said he was paying off some old debts by leaving the place to our exotic Ms. Tigress Perfume... although what a woman like that would want with a horse farm is beyond me."

"Jason built a very profitable stable."

"It's only profitable if the owner knows what he's doing," Clint muttered. "If she did decide to stay on, she'd run the place into the ground in six months."

Jason Langley's attorney refrained from answering that. "You *will* be here, Hollister? After all, you are the trainer for Clearwater Hills Farm. The old man requested that you attend."

If he hadn't had enough trouble lately, Clint considered bleakly, now he was expected to spend an afternoon with Blackwood and an empty-headed model.

"I've still got to pack."

"You're not staying on?"

"Hell, no. I've worked too hard building this place up to watch some underdressed female flush it down the tubes."

Dispensing with politeness, he hung up and made his way into the shower.

BLAIR MACKENZIE sat alone in the back seat of the gray Mercedes, lost in thought. She was vaguely aware of Marni's flirtatious chatter, designed to charm Ramsey Blackwood, but her gaze was directed out at the vast rolling grasslands. Blair still felt like pinching herself. The whole place was hers now. A lifetime dream had been dumped in her lap.

That thought brought up one problem. Clint Hollister. Her future lay in the hands of a man she'd never met. Blair sighed, hoping he wouldn't prove difficult.

The man Blair was thinking about cursed under his breath as he viewed

the cloud of dust billowing up from the road. Moments later the car stopped in front of the sprawling ranch house.

"Here, Jerry, you'd better take over," Clint said, handing the bucket of spring-water laced with baby oil to the young groom. He patted the chestnut filly's neck. "Unless my luck has changed, your new owner has just shown up," he muttered to the horse.

Ramsey Blackwood emerged from the driver's seat, followed by the two women.

"We missed you," the attorney began.

"I was busy," Clint told him. He had to force himself not to stare at the lithe brunette standing next to the car. This was the Tigress perfume woman? No way. That famous ad had shown her skimpily clad in a tiger-striped bikini, lounging beside a jungle pool, her parted lips moist, the open sexual invitation gleaming in her hooded, golden-brown eyes. Masses of thick dark hair had tumbled over bare shoulders. She was the type of woman every man fantasized getting into his bed.

This woman's dark hair was tucked demurely into a navy fedora. Her matching suit was relieved only by a white silk blouse and a triangle of crimson tucked into the breast pocket of the jacket. Except for those unforgettable legs, she resembled an attorney more than she did one of America's most popular models.

He forced himself to look at her companion and recognized her immediately. Long blond hair fell over deeply tanned bare shoulders. She wore a strapless camisole and white designer jeans that looked as if they'd been spray-painted on her. Marni Roberts's face and figure were as celebrated as Blair MacKenzie's, yet Marni

didn't affect him with the same jolt as the new owner of Clearwater Hills.

As his eyes locked onto her face, Blair felt her breath catch in her throat. She couldn't remember ever having seen a more rawly masculine man. The effect he had on her went beyond his looks—although his thick silver hair, wide shoulders and broad chest were impressive. His eyes were shielded by dark lenses, and Blair found herself guessing their color. A very good-looking man, he also possessed an impression of explosive strength that boded ill for anyone foolish enough to cross him. "Dangerous" was the word that came to mind.

Blair shifted her gaze to the raw-boned chestnut horse that had surprised skeptics by sweeping the New York Racing Association's Triple Crown for fillies. "She's magnificent."

"I've heard a lot of descriptions of Risky Pleasure, but that's a new one." Clint knew that most people saw only the filly's less-than-noble frame at first glance.

"I saw her run last year at the Meadowlands. She flew. It was the most magnificent thing I've ever seen!"

Clint fought down the pleasure that Blair's words brought him, forcing his voice into a short, gruff tone as he said, "Well, she's all yours now."

"Not exactly," Blackwood broke in. "Jason left the farm and all its inventory to Ms. MacKenzie...but you both share a fifty percent interest in Risky Pleasure."

"What? Jason never mentioned anything about that!"

"It isn't necessary for someone to disclose his final wishes, Hollister—especially to a hired hand."

Blair noticed that the younger man curled his hand into a fist, and she re-

alized there was no love lost between the two.

Ramsey went on, "I believe I've been remiss in my duties. Ms. MacKenzie, Ms. Roberts, may I introduce the farm's manager and head trainer, Clint Hollister."

Accustomed to male scrutiny as she was, Blair was unnerved by Clint's silent study. She held out her hand. "Mr. Hollister, it's an honor to meet you. Your name is a legend in racing circles."

Clint ignored her hand. Instead, he pulled off his sunglasses, meeting her friendly gaze with a bland look of his own. "Your reputation precedes you, too, Ms. MacKenzie. It's impossible to pick up a magazine or turn on the television these days without seeing the *Tigress Woman*."

Gray, Blair considered silently, even as she fought to control her quicksilver temper at the accusing innuendo in his tone. His eyes were a rich, lustrous pewter.

"Now that the introductions are over," Ramsey intervened smoothly, "I believe Ms. MacKenzie has an offer to make, Hollister."

Clint felt a fist twisting his stomach and knew it was more than a reaction to last night's binge. Blair's next words confirmed his gut reaction.

"I'm hoping you'll agree to stay on as trainer, Mr. Hollister."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"Oh? Won't you work with a woman?"

"I don't work with amateurs who consider owning a stable of racehorses a lark, along the lines of a skiing weekend at St. Moritz."

It took all of Blair's inner strength not to flinch at his gritty, censorious tone. "I can understand your reservations, Mr. Hollister. Suppose I assure

you that I take the entire enterprise more seriously than I've taken anything in my life?"

He leaned toward her, jamming his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "Look, lady, I'm one of the few trainers on the circuit who doesn't have an ulcer, and I don't intend to get one by having to listen to inane remarks from a woman whose only claim to fame is that she fills a bikini admirably."

Marni gasped, but Blair reminded herself that at this moment she needed Clint Hollister more than he needed her. Fortunately, her grandfather had left her one ace.

"I see. And what do you suggest we do with Risky Pleasure?"

"Since she's half mine, I'll continue to train her."

Blair smiled sweetly. "I'm relieved to hear that because it would be difficult to find a trainer with your skills this late in the season. And since you'll be training Risky Pleasure," she continued silkily, "it shouldn't be such a burden to work once in a while with the other horses, should it?"

Damn her! Clint dragged his gaze out across the rolling fields. She'd boxed him into a very neat corner without a blink of those dark lashes. He recognized the technique, having seen it in action over the years.

"You really are Jason Langley's granddaughter, aren't you?" he muttered.

"So I've been told."

"I expected you to sell," he admitted. "Do you actually believe you can run a racing stable?"

"I've more experience than you realize, Mr. Hollister. And yes, I believe I can, with your help. After all, we both want what's best for Risky Pleasure, don't we?"

Blair watched Clint make his decision. She'd been waiting her entire life for the chance to work with a filly like Risky Pleasure; at this point she'd sign the devil on as trainer. She put out her hand again. "Do we have a deal?"

This time Clint couldn't refuse taking her slender hand in his. "Just for this season," he warned. "Then we're going to have to work out a compromise."

Ramsey entered the conversation. "There's always the possibility of selling the filly," he said.

"Never!"

"Not on your life!"

Blair and Clint both spoke at the same time. They exchanged a long, appraising look.

"I suppose you want the grand tour," Clint said.

"I'd love it," Blair agreed, her face lighting up with the first real smile she'd granted him.

"Can't we get unpacked first?" Marni complained.

Blair knew that her roommate had no real interest in the farm. Marni had come along in search of greener pastures, but horses had nothing to do with it.

"Why don't I help Ms. Roberts get settled in?" Ramsey suggested. "And Hollister can show you around."

This will never work, Clint told himself as they headed toward the training barns. *Never in a million years. You're a fool even to try it*, he warned himself.

This will never work, Blair told herself. In their brief acquaintance, the man had shown himself to be cold, opinionated and a class-A chauvinist. *You're a fool even to try it*.

THE AIR in the office overlooking San Diego Bay was rife with tension. The

ashtray on the desk was filled with red-tipped cigarette filters, and the woman seated behind it had been tapping her nails impatiently on its surface for the last half hour.

"Well?" she asked finally. "When will we know?"

The question had been directed at the tall man gazing unseeingly out the window. "Hollister's with the MacKenzie woman now. He's supposed to call me as soon as things are settled."

"Here? Is that wise?"

"The call's being forwarded so no one will be the wiser. I told you not to worry."

The woman lit yet another cigarette. "Just don't forget, without Clearwater Hills Farm, everything we've accomplished will go down the drain."

The man spun around. "You'll have the damn farm!"

"I hope so," she said. "Because if you end up blowing things, you'll be the one facing a homicide charge."

"I told you, it was an accident!"

She viewed him through a thin veil of blue smoke. "And such a fortuitous accident it was, darling," she purred. "I just hope you never have to convince the police of that."

CLINT'S HEAD was throbbing as he walked with Blair across the paddock. He wasn't in the mood for small talk.

Blair finally broke the silence. "I know you hate me, Mr. Hollister, but we are stuck with each other."

"What makes you think I hate you?" Clint glanced at her.

"Because of the will, of course," she murmured. "After all, you're the one who made this farm what it is."

"Your grandfather's money is what built it," he corrected her. "So by rights it's yours, even if you never did

care enough to come home while the old man was alive."

"A lot you know about my family," she shot back.

"I know that you're just as stubborn and self-centered as your mother."

That was a low blow, and Blair stiffened. "Please don't make cracks about a woman you never even knew."

He shrugged. "I know enough."

"Then you know that Jason Langley forced his daughter to leave home so she could be with the man she loved." Blair's tone was cold with resentment. "My mother said he was a cruel man." She waited for Clint to deny the question in her voice.

He only shrugged. "I can't comment. He was never cruel to me."

"Then you always got along with him?"

Clint exploded into harsh laughter. "Hell, nobody *always* got along with Jason Langley! I figured that if we had fewer than fifty arguments during a twenty-four-hour period, we were having a good day."

"Yet you stayed."

He nodded, his laughter stopping abruptly. "Yeah, I stayed."

They fell silent, and Blair looked out at the rolling hillsides abloom with color. "It's absolutely beautiful."

"It's colorful now," he told her, "but we had a dry winter. All that color will be brown in another month."

"It'll still be lovely. I'll admit I was surprised to see so much commercial development on the drive up here from San Diego. Whoever's in charge of zoning around these parts should be horsewhipped."

That earned a laugh. "Yep, you are definitely Jason's granddaughter. He's been hollering about the encroaching development for the past five years."

Blair didn't miss Clint's use of the present tense. "You and my grandfather must have been very close."

"I suppose we were. As close as anyone could be to Jason Langley, anyway. He wasn't an easy man to know."

They reached the smaller of the two training barns. Blair inhaled the sweet, fragrant scent of hay and thought how different all this was from her apartment in Manhattan.

"We don't live a jet-set existence out here," Clint stated.

"I don't live a jet-set existence in New York, either. Besides, I'm not as young as I used to be. I can't be out late at night and still look presentable for a morning shoot."

She neglected to tell him that she was usually up at dawn, working at Aqueeduct for Ben Winters, a trainer almost as renowned as Hollister. Clint would never believe it anyway. Not until she'd proved to him that she knew her way around.

"Yeah, you're ancient. Let's see, according to Jason, your mother ran off with David MacKenzie the year Moonglow won the Belmont. And you were born—"

"Six months later," Blair finished abruptly. "So not only do you know that I'll be thirty on my next birthday, but also that I'm what is referred to as a 'love child.'"

He glanced over at her. "Did they love each other?"

Her expression softened. "Immensely. I think that's why Mom had her heart attack six months after Daddy's accident. After twenty-five years, she didn't want to live without him."

"That's rare—a marriage lasting that long these days."

Blair couldn't miss the edge to his voice. "Are you married?" she asked.

"Do I look like a married man?"

Blair turned toward him. His eyes held a challenging glint. "Well?"

Because of his tenseness and the fact that she assumed he was in his late thirties, Blair ventured a guess. "You were married when you were younger. But it didn't work out."

A muscle jerked in his harsh jawline. "Very good," he grated. "What else did your crystal ball tell you about me?"

She pressed her fingertips against her temples, closing her eyes for effect. "I see horses. Many horses. And a woman. A lovely, lonely woman who resents playing second fiddle to a stable of Thoroughbreds." It was a shot in the dark, but it was obvious she'd hit the bull's-eye.

"I think we've played this game long enough," Clint said abruptly, turning toward the barn.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm divorced myself, so I know how long it can take to get over something like that."

"I'm not divorced. Heather died several years ago."

"I'm sorry." Without thinking, she put her hand on his arm.

"Don't worry about it," he said gruffly. "It was a long time ago."

Blair nodded, deciding that Clint Hollister must have loved his wife a great deal. She remained silent as she followed him into the barn.

It was immaculate, not a straw askew, which told her that Hollister ran a very tight operation. But one thing did surprise her.

"You store the hay in the loft?"

He arched a brow. "Something wrong with that?"

Blair had opened Pandora's box; she might as well continue.

"In the first place, it's a lot of extra work, putting up the hay and taking it down. A separate, single-story hay

shed is more desirable. And surely you've read the reports that suggest that dust in the air of barns and stables leads to heaves."

"I've read them," he mumbled.

"What about fire?" she asked with feigned patience.

"The barns are made of concrete blocks," he replied.

"Still," she persisted, "from a purely economic aspect, if we kept the hay storage separate from the stalls, our insurance costs would be lower."

Clint understood all her arguments, having stated them himself over and over to Jason. But he was surprised to hear them come from Blair.

"Is that an order?"

"Merely a suggestion, Mr. Hollister."

"I'll keep it in mind," he allowed.

"And by the way, if you're going to insist on staying, you'll have to make some changes in your wardrobe," he said abruptly. "That suit isn't exactly the appropriate attire to wear around a farm."

"I realize that," she responded levelly, refusing to rise to his baiting tone. "Why don't I change and meet you in a few minutes?"

Clint shook his head. "Mildred will have dinner ready soon."

"Mildred?"

"Jason's housekeeper. You'll probably want her to stay on." His expression indicated that he expected little of Blair MacKenzie's domestic skills.

"I probably will," Blair agreed, thinking how much of her time would probably be spent in the stables. "What time does she usually serve dinner?"

"Five o'clock. I realize that's an unfashionable hour, but we do get up before the sun around here."

"That's fine," she murmured.

"However, after dinner I would like to

go over the day-to-day operation with you."

"I'll be up to the house around six."

Her dark eyebrows rose. "Don't you live in the house?"

"No. I've got my own place here on the property. And hired hands don't eat with the owner, ma'am," he stated in an exaggerated drawl.

"Oh, come off it," she snapped.

"I'll bet you ate with Jason."

"Jason was my friend."

Blair nodded thoughtfully. "I see. And I am..."

"The boss. *La jefe*," he repeated in Spanish.

"As the boss, I'm entitled to set down a few rules, aren't I?" She softened her tone. "I'd like you to eat with me tonight, Mr. Hollister."

"I've a date for dinner this evening, Ms. MacKenzie. Even the hired hand is entitled to an evening off."

"You said you'd be up at the house at six."

"That's right. I'm a fast eater."

As they exited the barn, Blair stopped in the doorway. "Do you wish I'd agreed to sell the farm?"

At her forthright question, Clint rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. You had to be a combination of tough-minded pragmatist and incurable dreamer to run a Thoroughbred racing stable. Blair MacKenzie seemed to know something about horses, and he had no doubt she was a dreamer...

"I'm beginning to suspect that Jason Langley's stubborn blood is definitely flowing in your veins, Ms. MacKenzie."

She grinned. "How about that? We finally agree on something."

He shook his head. "I don't know which of us is crazier. You for thinking you can run this place or me for staying on."

"I'm not as inexperienced as you think."

"I don't have a single doubt about that."

Before she could answer, Clint cursed and flung her to the ground. A moment later she was pinned under him.

Blair looked up into his gray eyes, her own flare of anger extinguished as she saw his expression of honest concern. And something else that was too guarded for her to read.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I will be as soon as you get off me," she protested.

"I was trying to save your damn neck!" With that, he abruptly jumped up and ran back into the barn. She heard the harsh sound of his boots as he climbed the ladder to the hayloft.

Blair sat up as he strode back to her.

He squatted beside her, strong fingers cupping her chin as he jerked her head toward the door of the barn.

"Look over there. Where you were standing a minute ago."

Blair's confused gaze swept the area. Her eyes came to rest on a pitchfork lying on the ground, and she felt the blood leave her head.

"Where did that come from?"

"From overhead. And I don't think it was an accident, either."

"Because a pitchfork slips out of a bale of hay?" she argued. "That's not so unusual."

"It is in my training barn. The kids know that if they ever did a dumb stunt like that, I'd can them so fast they wouldn't know what hit them."

"Perhaps someone forgot," she murmured.

"Yeah. Perhaps." His tone didn't sound convincing.

Before Blair could ask Clint what he meant, he stood up again, towering over her.

"I've got a telephone call to make," he said, his eyes unreadable behind the dark glasses.

Blair nodded. "Fine. I'll see you at six."

"Six," he agreed curtly.

Blair rose wearily, brushing the dust off her skirt. Working with Clint Hollister wasn't going to be any bed of roses. Perhaps she should just lay her credentials on the table and let the man see that she wasn't totally unqualified to be running a farm. But then she'd be cheated out of watching the amazement on his face when he realized she knew a lot more than he'd given her credit for.

So lost was she in her own little fantasy, Blair neglected to notice the solitary figure standing in the shadows of the barn, watching her head for the house with unwavering interest.

THE MAN CAUGHT the telephone receiver on the first ring. "I've been waiting for your call," he said. "How did it go?"

The watching woman puffed nervously on her cigarette.

"She's what? You gotta be kidding!" He slumped into a chair and stretched his legs out in front of him. "That's one hell of a surprise," he stated. "Yeah, well, good luck."

He hung up and leaned his head back. "She isn't going to sell."

The woman expelled a harsh oath. "That's ridiculous. She *has* to sell."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then she'll have to be dealt with in some other way."

*

FOLLOWING a delicious aroma, Blair soon found the kitchen. She was prepared to introduce herself to the

woman at the stove, but that proved unnecessary.

"My goodness, child, you look just like your mama!"

"You knew my mother?"

"Sure did. Oh, I'm Mildred Kent, but I was Mildred Harris when Kate and I were going to school together. We were as close as sisters, inseparable. But once she met David, everything kind of went crazy.... For the first few years, she'd write every so often. Then it dwindled down to Christmas cards, and finally I lost track of her altogether."

"We moved around a lot," Blair admitted.

"I hope she was happy."

"She was. But I think she missed the farm."

"I have to tell you, child, your grandfather sure missed her. He was really torn up when she died. The poor man's heart started hopping around like a Mexican jumping bean. The doctor had to put him in the hospital."

"That may explain why he didn't come to the funeral," Blair pointed out. "But he still could have called. Or sent a card."

Mildred gave her a long look. "Kate wasn't the only one who bore a grievance from those days. They were two hardheaded, foolish people. I'm guessing you've got a fair streak of stubbornness in yourself, girl, if you're staying on here to try to make a go of it. But don't let that trait ruin your life. Like it did for Jason and Kate."

With that advice she took off her apron. "The meatballs are in the warming oven. I've left the spaghetti sauce on the stove. Would you mind boiling the pasta?"

"Of course not," Blair answered.

"Good night, Blair," Mildred said, heading toward the kitchen door. "Be sure to lock the house up after I leave."

"Out here?" Blair's Manhattan apartment boasted three sturdy locks, but here there was nothing for miles around.

"Some weird things have been happening around here lately. If they hadn't started before Jason died, I'd think the place was haunted."

"Haunted! Surely you don't believe that, Mildred."

The woman shrugged. "Lock the doors," she ordered firmly.

"Yes, ma'am," Blair said, sliding off the stool to comply.

She found Marni preparing for her dinner date with Ramsey Blackwood. Her friend's black silk dress hugged her body like a second skin, the dark color a striking foil for her light complexion.

"When is Mr. Wonderful picking you up?"

"Don't be so snippy," Marni complained.

"He should be glad you agreed to go out with him. He looks about as exciting as a slice of white bread."

"To each her own," Marni murmured, as a car horn blared outside.

"He honked the horn for you? Like some teenager?" asked Blair.

"Uh-uh. That's the taxi. It's a long drive up here from the city," Marni answered.

"It's a long drive for you, too."

"I've already got one mother who drives me crazy, Blair. I don't need another."

Blair gave up. "Have a good time," she offered.

"Thanks, hon. Don't wait up." With that she was gone.

Blair sighed, then decided to take a shower before dinner. She let the pelting water soothe the stiffness in her

muscles that she knew was due to stress. As she massaged the shampoo through her hair, she vowed that she'd sit down with Clint Hollister after dinner for a serious talk about the future of the farm. At least they had that interest in common.

Just then Blair thought she heard a sound outside the bathroom door. Her hands froze. *Ridiculous*, she scolded herself. *You've seen Psycho too many times, that's all. It's simply the house settling, dummy.*

Blair hurried through the rest of the shower, feeling unreasonably safe once she'd slipped into her robe. She combed her wet hair, but decided she was too tired to blow it dry. Jet lag had begun to catch up with her, and she hadn't eaten all day. She returned to the kitchen, realizing she was starving.

Her eyes widened when she saw Clint standing at the stove. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you always this hospitable?"

"I locked that door, Mr. Hollister."

His back was to her as he lowered a handful of pasta into a kettle of steaming water. "Why don't you call me Clint? As for your locking the door, I have a key."

"How convenient," she said.

"I think so," he agreed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked again.

He turned toward her, his pupils flaring ever so slightly at the sight of her. God, she was lovely!

"Simple. I was invited to dinner, remember?"

"I thought you had a date."

"I changed my plans. Thought I'd come over and give you a hand." His expression held no guile that Blair could see. "The time difference should be catching up with you about now."

She nodded. "It is. You'd think with all the traveling I've done, I'd learn to conquer jet lag, wouldn't you?"

His eyes took on a hard gleam. "Ah, the painful sacrifices of the jet set," he drawled. "I can tell you're going to love getting up at three-thirty."

"I'll manage," she promised briskly, sitting down on the stool and crossing her legs in a fluid gesture that did not go unnoticed by Clint. She shifted uncomfortably. "I suppose you think I'm terrible for missing my grandfather's funeral," she said softly.

"Your grandfather didn't have a funeral."

"He didn't? But Mr. Blackwood said everything was already taken care of. I thought..."

"Jason was cremated yesterday without any fuss." He eyed her blandly. "Feeling guilty that you showed up only to collect the farm, Blair?"

"I was out of the country. It took the cable two days to catch up with me. I came as soon as I could."

"You don't have to apologize to me."

Blair didn't like his tone. "Well, perhaps we should have a memorial service. Could you give me a list of his friends?"

"Jason didn't have many friends."

That information didn't surprise her. "I see. Do you know what religion my grandfather was?"

"He didn't attend any church."

"Oh. Then I suppose a secular service—"

"No, Jason was adamant about that. No service of any kind."

"I feel I should do something," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

Clint knew exactly how she felt. That was the reason for last night's drunk. It hadn't seemed right—one

minute the old man was there; the next, he was gone without a trace.

"There's something you can do," he suggested.

"What's that, Clint?" she whispered, her gaze trapped by his intense gray eyes.

He did not miss the fact that she'd called him by his first name. "Win." He repeated it with more vigor, as if reassuring himself. "Win every damn race you can this season. Because that's what the old man really cared about. Winning."

The look of gratitude Blair gave him made Clint feel guilty for the rough time he'd given her. "Win," she agreed slowly. "That's exactly what I intend to do. We'll make this the best season ever."

Blair could not miss the gleam of desire in Clint Hollister's steady gaze. But what was even more unnerving was the way his warm gray eyes triggered an answering response deep inside her.

Dangerous, she reminded herself, not for the first time. She'd have to remember that.

"I'll be right back," she said suddenly, realizing that dressed as she was, she was just asking for trouble. "I'm going to change." Escaping to the privacy of her own room, she changed into cream-colored jeans and a red sweater.

Clint greeted her with an admiring glance. "That didn't take long," he said, handing her a glass of burgundy. "Here. It should go nicely with spaghetti."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Hollister."

"Clint," he corrected, head inside the huge refrigerator. "I'm just trying to get in good with the boss."

He pulled out a bowl of salad and poured dressing over the fresh greens.

"Where's your friend?" Clint asked.

"Out." Blair's slight sigh told her feeling about that.

Steam rose like one of Mildred's ghosts as he emptied the pot of spaghetti into a copper strainer. "Then I guess it's just you and me tonight, huh?"

Blair slid off the stool and refilled her wineglass.

"Don't get any ideas about this," she warned. "You're going home after we discuss the farm."

"Wrong again. In case you've forgotten, someone aimed a pitchfork at that silly little hat today. I'm moving in until I'm certain you're safe."

"That was an accident."

"Prove it," he countered.

"I can't any more than you can prove it was intentional."

"Then we'll play it my way until one of us is proved wrong. Don't worry, Blair, it's a big house. You won't even know I'm around."

Suddenly too tired to argue, Blair fell silent.

Clint filled two plates with meatballs and spaghetti, then offered her a thick slice of French bread which she accepted.

"I thought all you high-fashion models lived on rabbit food," he said, eyes skimming her slender curves.

"This is the first thing I've eaten today," she admitted. "And we're talking about Italian food here, mister. Besides, I'm retiring. I can eat anything I want."

"What about the Tigress campaign?"

"I'm calling my agent Monday morning and telling him to do whatever's necessary to get me out of that contract."

"He's bound to be thrilled."

"He'll hit the roof," she agreed happily.

Watching her refill her wineglass, Clint advised, "I'd go easy on that. Considering the jet lag and that you didn't eat anything all day, the wine is bound to go right to your head."

"A few glasses are not going to make me roaring drunk," she said, and took a sip of the excellent burgundy. While she'd never admit it to Clint, Blair realized her head was spinning just a little. The idea that he might be right only served to irritate her.

Clint observed her push away the wineglass and nodded. "That's better," he stated. "Believe me, it's hell getting up at dawn and working all day with a hangover."

"I'm perfectly capable of hard work, and I've never had a hangover in my life," Blair snapped back. "I think you ought to remember who's boss around here."

"Such a lovely mouth," he murmured, "to be home to such a viper's tongue." He reached out, tracing the line of her lips with his fingertip. "Absolutely lovely," he murmured, his pewter eyes growing lustrous as he held her gaze. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"As beautiful as a woman can be with reptiles leaping out of her mouth, right?"

"I apologize for that. I should be used to it, living with your grandfather all those years." Pushing back his chair, he rose slowly and came around the table. As he took her hands and lifted her to her feet, Blair's words of protest lodged in her throat.

When his lips brushed hers, she sighed lightly. There was nothing tentative in the way Clint's mouth moved on hers, nor was it a kiss of hungry passion. His lips caressed hers in tender exploration.

The man might drive her up a wall with his arrogant attitude, but he was

one heck of a kisser, she decided as his tongue lightly stroked the flesh of her lower lip.

"Mmm," he murmured, his lips plucking gently at hers. "You taste very good, Ms. MacKenzie."

"So do you, Mr. Hollister. So do you."

"Clint," he corrected, looking down into her flushed, lovely face. No woman responded as willingly as Blair had just done without possessing some measure of trust for the man. He wondered fleetingly if, given a little time, he could convince her to sell the farm. After all, he'd only be moving the timetable up. Blair would have to sell eventually.

She suddenly realized that her fingers were entangled in Clint's hair, and pulled her hands away. "That never should have happened."

"I think it was inevitable," he responded with a shrug.

"Well, it isn't going to happen again," she pledged.

"Isn't it?" He began to take the dishes from the table.

"You're forgetting—"

Clint sighed. "I know—exactly who's boss. I always knew I'd hate working for a female."

"Chauvinist. May I point out that Risky Pleasure is a female? And I'll bet I know more than you do about horses, old Clint Know-it-all Hollister."

"I should teach you not to make such rash statements, Ms. MacKenzie, and take you up on that bet. But there's a certain code of honor about not taking advantage of a lady when she's smashed."

"Smashed! That's ridiculous."

"Whatever you say," he agreed. "However, you are decidedly tipsy." He put his hands on her shoulders, turning her toward the kitchen door.

"What are you doing?"

"Putting you to bed before you pass out."

"I've never passed out in my life. And I've never been drunk, either," she argued, nevertheless allowing him to direct her down the long hallway.

"Which room?"

"Oh... a big one. Third door on the left."

He sat Blair down on the bed. From the top dresser drawer, he pulled out a red nightshirt with a big orange cat on the front.

"Do you actually wear this thing?" he asked.

She folded her arms over her chest. "Got something against Garfield?"

"No. I just figured you'd wear something a little..."

"Sexier?" She rose, swaying slightly. "You're stereotyping again, Mr. Hollister," she stated firmly and marched into the bathroom.

When she came out, Clint experienced that now familiar surge of desire. "I was wrong," he said. "You look sexy as hell in that outfit. All of a sudden I find myself envying Garfield."

She ran her hands nervously down the front of the nightshirt. "I think I should go to bed now."

"Good night, Ms. MacKenzie."

"Blair," she said softly. "My name is Blair."

"Good night, Blair," he repeated. "Go to sleep. We've got a big day tomorrow and we start a lot earlier than you're used to."

Blair shook her head, trying to clear away the fog. "That's what you think," she murmured. "I'm going to surprise you, Clint Hollister. Just you wait and see."

You already have, Blair MacKenzie, he answered silently.

HE WAS SITTING in the darkened den when the phone rang. Knowing who would be calling, he heaved a weary sigh as he picked it up. "Hello, Blackwood."

"How did you know it was me?" the attorney inquired.

"Didn't you know? I've gotten psychic in my old age."

Clint braced the receiver against his shoulder while he poured a glass of bourbon.

"What are you doing up at the house?"

"Talking to you. Later I'll probably get a little drunk, then go to bed. Alone," he tacked on pointedly.

"I had dinner with her friend tonight. There's something about the woman we didn't know, something that might change things," Blackwood warned. "She's been working for Ben Winters. In fact, Marni told me she'd been helping train horses since she was a kid."

Suddenly Clint understood Blair's attitude. He wondered why she hadn't just told him straight out. Then he realized she'd been planning to surprise him. Hell, he thought, he could go along and play her little game. What would it hurt?

"Well?" Blackwood asked.

"Well, what?"

"She might not sell so easily. But you could talk her into it."

"What are you suggesting?"

"You're an attractive-enough man, Hollister, in an earthy sort of way. I know Heather certainly thought so, and—"

"I don't want to talk about her!"

"Of course," Ramsey said smoothly. "I understand. Considering the way she died, and all."

Clint's jaw tensed. "Go to hell, Blackwood," he snapped, and hung up.

IT WAS STILL DARK when Blair's clock radio came on. She washed her face, brushed her teeth and dressed in record time, braiding her hair as she tiptoed down the long hallway.

Marni's door was shut; Blair wondered what time her friend had gotten in as she went in search of Clint, stopping to ask a young groom where she might find him.

"He's in training barn A," the young man said.

"Thanks. You're Jerry Graham, right? Risky Pleasure's groom."

"That's right," he replied.

"I'm Blair MacKenzie." She introduced herself.

At the barn doorway, Blair watched Clint as he greeted each horse with a warm, individual welcome.

"Good morning!" she said cheerily, determined to start the day off on a friendly note.

Clint turned at her words, his eyes narrowing. "You look about seventeen," he responded.

A high flush rose on her cheeks as his prolonged study became intensely personal.

"It's your hair," he said finally. He drew nearer, picking up the thick plait and laying it across his palm. "It's a crime the way you keep tying it up. You should always wear it loose."

"Ah, yet another male seeking the Tigress Woman."

"Is that so bad?" He lifted the braid and brushed the fan of freed hair against her throat. Her pulse leaped at the tantalizing touch.

Clint held her gaze with the sheer strength of his will, daring her to deny the shared physical attraction. "The chemistry has been going crazy between us since you arrived yesterday. You can't deny that."

She couldn't. But that didn't mean she was in the habit of jumping into

bed with every man she was attracted to. Not that there were that many. As it was, Blair's spare time was usually devoted to horses. At least that was one species of animal she could understand.

They worked comfortably after that, Blair taking one side of the barn, Clint the other. She'd just reached Mator, a bay gelding, when Jerry burst in.

"Clint, come quick! It's Black Magic—he can't stand up!"

Hay scattered unheeded to the barn floor as Clint took off at a run. Blair was right behind him.

"Oh, Lord," Clint said on a sigh.

Black Magic was lying down, his velvet brown eyes alert as Clint examined each leg. Blair squatted by the stallion's head, stroking his sweat-dampened neck, crooning to him.

Clint moved the front leg, and the horse shuddered. "It's broken," he said grimly. "How the hell did this happen?"

Blair had trouble forcing the words past the lump in her throat. "I don't suppose we could save him?"

"It's a little difficult to keep a horse in bed while the bone heals. The pattern's shot, Blair. Even if I wanted to risk gut troubles by keeping him in a sling for several weeks, the corporation wouldn't allow it. They'd be better off collecting the insurance."

"You're thinking of this as a business decision?"

"He's not my horse, honey," Clint said in a low, soothing voice. His eyes displayed his own misery at the situation.

"Well, he's mine," Blair argued.

Clint shook his head. "Your grandfather syndicated Black Magic for three million dollars after he won the Derby and the Belmont. What you and I want doesn't have a damn thing to do with it."

Blair turned her head away, unwilling to allow Clint to see her cry. In doing so, she missed seeing a similar moisture brighten his own eyes.

"Jerry," Clint called softly to the silent groom.

"Yes, Clint?"

"Go call the vet."

The young man left the barn, his shoulders drooping.

"Blair?" Clint reached out, brushing away some errant tears with his knuckles. "I am sorry. I love this horse. I was there the night he came into the world. We won a lot of races together, Black Magic and I. If there was anything I could do..."

Blair put her hand over his. "I believe you, Clint."

His bleak gaze held hers. "Truce?"

She tried a smile that failed. "Truce," she agreed.

"Want to try for friends?"

Black Magic's dark eyes turned to her at that point, and it was almost as if the horse were encouraging Blair to drop her combative stance.

"I'd like that," she admitted, thinking that right now she needed all the friends she could get.

The sun was creeping above the hills when the vet walked in the barn door, carrying a black bag.

His expression turned sober as he knelt beside the injured stallion, his deft fingers probing the shattered bone. "Perhaps you'd better leave now, Ms. MacKenzie," Bill Collins suggested.

Blair shook her head. "I'm staying."

She was holding Black Magic's head on her lap, and now she bent over to press a kiss against his nose, closing her eyes when she felt the man beside her insert the hypodermic needle into the stallion.

"Well, that's that," he said.

Blair rubbed unselfconsciously at her free-falling tears.

"This is one part of my job I always hate," Bill muttered. "I was hoping Northern Lights would be the last one for the year."

Clint muttered an oath, banging one fist into his palm. In his despair, he'd forgotten the Thoroughbred on the neighboring farm who'd broken a leg in much the same manner three months earlier. Perhaps it was only a coincidence. Then again, perhaps not.

"Suddenly this looks damn suspicious."

Blair put a trembling hand on his arm. "You're not suggesting..." The idea was too horrible to state aloud.

"That someone purposely broke Black Magic's leg?" Clint said harshly. "That's precisely what I am suggesting."

"That's a strong accusation, Clint. Who'd do something like that?" said Collins.

"Someone who wants to destroy this farm. It's not the first thing that's happened around here, Bill. Yesterday someone tried to deck Blair with a pitchfork."

The vet's green eyes widened. "It must have been an accident."

"That's what I tried to tell him," Blair offered, her tone not as certain as when she had said that last evening. "Besides, horses have been known to jam their legs into a corner, Clint."

"If it was an isolated incident, I might tend to believe that. But I think it goes a lot deeper."

"Wait just one minute," the vet urged. "If it's somebody who wants to destroy you, why would he break Northern Lights's leg?"

"I don't know," Clint admitted. "But you can be damn sure I'm going to call Matt Bradshaw and see if we can come up with a common thread."

Clint's arm was around her shoulder as they watched Bill Collins drive away.

Blair met his questioning gaze with a level one of her own. "If this was an accident, I'll take it as such and carry on. If it was done to scare me away, it isn't going to work. I'm staying."

"Just like your grandfather," he murmured. "And I mean that in the very best way."

THE MAN SAT alone in the gray dawn, wondering how much bourbon he'd have to drink before reaching oblivion. How the hell had this gotten so damn complicated? It had all seemed so easy in the beginning.

The phone rang and he reached for it blindly. Only one person would call him at this ungodly hour of the morning.

"Is it done?" the feminine voice asked.

He took a long drink of bourbon. "Since I haven't heard otherwise, I assume everything went as planned."

"Good."

The pleasure in her voice grated on his nerves. "Don't you care about anything?" he asked brusquely.

"Of course I do. I care a great deal about money. And about you."

"And Black Magic?"

"He was only a horse, darling," she cooed reassuringly.

"A great horse," he muttered, tossing off the bourbon.

"Excuse me if I can't get as excited about those dumb animals as you do, sweetheart. May I point out that they never brought you a world of wealth?"

"I need some sleep," he decided. "I'll talk to you later."

"Fine," she agreed. "I'll be expecting your call."

"Sure," he mumbled, "but don't worry. If this doesn't work, I've a second surprise planned that's bound to have her packing her suitcases."

*

BLAIR WAITED, watching as Annie, the exercise jockey, jogged Risky Pleasure clockwise around the track for approximately three eighths of a mile. Then the filly was given her head, and Blair gasped at the sheer power she exhibited. The dark head was down, the ears were up, and the hooves hit the ground as if she were driving nails. She tore past, a streak of flowing mane and tail. The filly had gone a quarter of a mile before the rider could bring her to a stop.

"Well?" Clint looked at Blair, whose gaze was fixed on the horse; she was stunned to see that Risky Pleasure wasn't even breathing hard.

"You're right. She's not just the best filly. She's the best Thoroughbred racing today. Period."

"I'd like to prove that. I want to race her against Cimarron."

Blair stared. "You can't be serious!"

"Of course I am. Don't you think she can win?"

Blair had seen Cimarron run only twice, the previous fall at Aqueduct. The stallion was acclaimed as the greatest horse since Secretariat.

"Even if she could," Blair argued, "it would be too much of a risk. Don't forget what happened to Ruffian when they ran her against a stallion. She had to be destroyed, Clint."

"This horse is older than Ruffian was, and has a lot more experience. Blair, believe me, she's the best horse I've ever trained. They just don't come with any more natural ability."

"Or with worse pasterns," she pointed out.

They both fell silent, as the jockey began to jog the filly around the track once again.

"What do you suggest we do?" Clint asked.

At that moment, Risky Pleasure broke into a run, and Blair felt her breath stop at the display of raw power.

"Do you think beating Cimarron will be easy?" she asked.

Clint tried to keep the excitement from his voice when he realized that Blair was beginning to consider the idea seriously. "No," he answered. "But do you know anything in life that's easy?"

She turned, leaning against the fence and crossing her arms. "No, I don't." She glanced back at the filly for a long, silent moment. "Let me think about it, okay?"

FROM THE ICY atmosphere in the kitchen as Blair entered after Risky Pleasure's workout, she knew that Marni and Mildred had argued about breakfast.

"Hi," Blair greeted them, taking the fresh cup of coffee Mildred extended. She turned to Marni. "How was your date?"

"Okay," Marni mumbled, after swallowing her morning ration of vitamin pills. "But it's a little hard on a girl's ego when a guy spends the entire evening talking about some other woman. You made quite an impression." Marni's voice held a sulky tone.

"Me? You talked about me?"

Marni nodded. "And it got really odd, too. First, he told me how hard it was to run a horse farm, and how it was no place for a novice. So I told him all about your working with Ben Win-

ters and that you know everything in the world about horses."

"I don't know everything."

"Well, you know a lot more than I do. But it's *not* going to be easy, Blair, running this place all alone."

"I've got Clint to help."

"That's another thing." Marni cast a surreptitious look at Mildred, who was cleaning the counters. "Come with me."

Once they were behind her closed bedroom door, Marni didn't waste any time. "Ramsey's worried about your being alone out here with that trainer of yours."

"I'm not alone. There are tons of people working here. Besides, what could he be worried about?"

"Your safety." Marni reached out and took Blair's hands in hers. "Honey, the man's been in prison."

"Prison?" she said. "I don't believe it."

"It's true," her friend insisted. "Ramsey showed me an old newspaper story... Blair, the man was convicted of murdering his wife."

Blair closed her eyes against the pain that seared through her. "I can't believe that," she stated finally.

"Ask him," Marni advised.

"I can't do that. It's none of my business." Blair's words sounded unconvincing, even to her own ears.

"Honey, you're sleeping under the same roof with a convicted felon—a murderer—for God's sake!" Her blue eyes narrowed. "Oh, shoot. You like the guy, don't you?"

"I like him," Blair agreed grimly, thinking that "like" didn't begin to cover her feelings. "Marni, why don't you just tell me what Blackwood said?"

"All right." Marni took a deep breath. "Heather Hollister was a wealthy woman. The prosecuting at-

torney had witnesses who swore she and Clint argued all the time."

"Lots of husbands and wives argue," Blair pointed out. "But they don't kill each other."

"One of the more frequent arguments was over Heather's refusal to give him the money to buy Risky Pleasure from your grandfather."

"Why would he want to? He was already training her."

"It seems he had an obsession about the horse," Marni explained. "He and Jason Langley didn't agree on anything about her, so Clint wanted carte blanche in her training. Your grandfather refused."

Blair tried to think of the way Clint's gray eyes turned to a polished pewter when he talked about the filly.

"Blair, there's more." Marni leaned forward. "Did you ever wonder why there wasn't a funeral for your grandfather?"

"He didn't want one."

"How do you know?"

"Clint told me." Blair thought she knew where this conversation was going. "If you're accusing him of killing my grandfather, you're way off base. Even if he was capable of murder, he had nothing to gain."

"He's already got fifty percent of his precious racehorse," Marni pointed out.

"He's going to have more than that. I called Ramsey first thing this morning and told him I wanted to deed half my interest in the farm to Clint."

Marni stared at Blair. "What on earth for?"

"So he'll stay on here. I need him, Marni."

Marni sighed. "Honey, don't you realize your life could be in danger here?"

"That's ridiculous," Blair retorted. She stared out the window, experienc-

ing that now familiar quickening deep inside her as she watched Clint stride toward a red Blazer that had just pulled up.

She turned to Marni with a stern gaze. "Tell me this," she said tersely. "If Clint Hollister killed his wife, why isn't he still in prison?"

Marni shrugged. "Ramsey wasn't clear on that point," she admitted. "Some technicality." Her eyes gave a warning. "But that doesn't make him less guilty."

"I don't want you to say a word to anyone about this," Blair instructed her firmly. With that, she left the room and headed toward the den, drawn by the sound of male voices.

"Blair, I was just about to send the Saint Bernards out looking for you." Clint smiled as she entered, but his eyes held little seeds of worry.

Blair couldn't quite meet his gaze. "I'm sorry. I was talking to Marni."

"I want you to meet your neighbor, Matt Bradshaw."

A tall blond man rose from his chair and extended his hand. "It's a pleasure, Ms. MacKenzie. Your grandfather was always talking about you."

"My grandfather talked about me?"

"All the time. He even kept a scrapbook of every magazine layout you did. In fact..." Brilliant emerald eyes scanned the room. "Hey, Clint, what happened to that photo he had framed?"

Clint refused to admit that the glossy color photo was now on his bedside table. "I don't know," he replied.

"That Tigress perfume layout was really something, Ms. MacKenzie," he confessed with a grin.

She managed a tight smile. "Call me Blair," she suggested.

"And I'm Matt." Then his expression grew serious. "I'm damned sorry about Black Magic, Blair."

She nodded, refusing to let herself cry over the stallion anymore. "Thank you. I'm sorry about Northern Lights, too. He was one horse who could have given Cimarron a run for the money at Churchill Downs this year."

Her words piqued Matt's interest. "Your grandfather never said anything about your following the horses."

"Blair's been working with Ben Winters," Clint offered, then remembered he wasn't supposed to know that. Blair's wide amber eyes revealed both surprise and confusion.

Clint got a reprieve when Marni peeked in.

"Blair, there's someone at the door for you."

"Come in and keep our neighbor company," she invited.

"Marni Roberts," Matt said instantly. "Ever since you did that shampoo commercial, I've thought you had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen." Suddenly he appeared to realize that there were others present. "Oh, damn. I *am* sorry, Blair. I didn't mean that yours weren't lovely. It's just that Ms. Roberts always seemed to be looking directly at me."

Matt Bradshaw groaned with embarrassment as he slumped back into his chair. "Don't mind me, folks. I think I'll just sit here and wait for the ground to swallow me up." To Blair's amusement, a dark flush rose from the man's open collar.

"Excuse me." She smiled. "I'll see who's here and be right back." She went to the front door.

"Ms. MacKenzie?" A young deliveryman was standing there.

"That's me," she answered.

"I put the flowers in training barn B, like I was told to. I just need your signature."

Blair shrugged, doing as requested. "Why on earth would you put flowers in the training barn?"

"I dunno. That's what was on the delivery slip."

Blair went out the back door and cut across the training barn, where she found the flowers. Throwing a hand over her mouth to stifle the scream that threatened, she ran back to the house.

"Clint!" Blair burst into the den. "You won't believe what that horrible person's done now!"

Clint felt his stomach turn over as he viewed her anguished face. "What's the matter? Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I'll show you," she said, linking her fingers with Clint's as she led him out of the room. Matt followed.

Black Magic had been removed from his stall, but in the stallion's place was a horseshoe of roses, much the same as those draped about his neck when he won the Kentucky Derby. But these roses were black and the banner read, "Black Magic—RIP."

"You were right," she said. "It was intentional. We have to call the police."

"No!"

"Why can't you call the police, Clint?" she asked quietly. Blair hated to see how uncomfortable he seemed with the subject. She glanced at Matt, who didn't look thrilled, either.

Clint took her unresisting hands in his, his thumbs making soothing circles on the tender skin of her palms.

"Look, we're training horses for other owners," he reminded her.

"And if word got out that Black Magic was destroyed on purpose, they would take their horses away."

"Exactly."

"That's right," Matt echoed. "You have enough of your own stock, Blair, so you'd probably survive. But I'd

have to close down. You must know how much even a single horse costs."

"That's the truth," Clint agreed grimly, his face set in harsh lines. "Especially one in training."

Blair felt a prickling of apprehension skim up her spine. Was he talking about Risky Pleasure now? To what lengths would the man go in order to see his dream come true? She shook her head, disallowing the vague little seed of suspicion a chance to sprout.

Marni had misunderstood the newspaper article. She simply had not gotten the story straight. That was the only explanation.

"All right," Blair conceded. "But we're going to have to tighten security around here."

"That's exactly what I'd planned to do," Clint said calmly. "So we agree?"

"I suppose so. But I don't particularly like the idea."

"Neither do I, Blair," Clint muttered. "But it's all we can do for now."

"WHAT ON earth happened to you?" Marni's clear blue eyes widened as Blair entered her bedroom, where she had just finished changing for a visit to Matt's farm.

"It's a long, complicated story I'll tell you later. Right now I just want to take a shower and a nap."

"You certainly look as if you could use both," Marni said.

Blair stuck out her tongue. "A fine friend you are." Eyeing her closely, Blair went on, "You know, I've given it a lot of thought, Marni. If you didn't misunderstand that story about Clint, obviously Ramsey has it all screwed up."

"Hey, Marni! Ready to go?" Matt called.

"Coming," she trilled. Then her tone became serious. "You know, Blair, I hate leaving you here alone."

"I'm not alone."

"I know. That's what worries me."

"Clint didn't murder his wife," Blair insisted. "I told you, Ramsey's confused."

"I doubt that," Marni argued, "especially since Heather Hollister's maiden name was Blackwood." She paused, allowing her words to sink in. "She was Ramsey's daughter, honey."

LATER THAT morning, Blair entered the sunlit kitchen to find Clint seated at the table, drinking a cup of coffee.

"You look better," he decreed. "But you're still pale."

"I feel as if I've landed in the middle of a Robert Ludlum novel," she admitted.

"I know the feeling," he said.

"Where's Mildred?"

"I sent her home. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," Blair answered. "But why?"

"I didn't think it was fair to involve her. Who knows what's going to happen next?"

Blair nodded, watching him. No, she decided firmly. Even if Clint Hollister hadn't had those gorgeous gray eyes, she would still believe him innocent of Ramsey Blackwood's charges. She *knew* he was incapable of cruelty.

"I think you should leave, too," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"I'm not afraid," she protested.

His flinty gray gaze speared her. "Then you're an idiot. Because I sure as hell am." His voice softened. "I'm afraid for you, Blair. You should leave until this is settled."

Blair stood her ground. "Clint, I'm not allowing anyone to chase me

away." She reached out, covering his hand with hers.

Clint looked down at the fair hand and experienced a sudden urge to lift it to his lips. Instead he jerked his hand away, reminding himself that he had more important things to consider.

"Are you hungry?" he asked suddenly.

Blair smiled. "I'm always hungry. Marni says I'm going to end up looking like the Pillsbury Doughboy."

"Come on, then," he said, rising. "We're going on a picnic. Mildred fixed it before she left. I thought you might like to visit Irish Rover, the horse that built this farm. He's pastured a short drive from here."

"I'd love it," she agreed instantly.

They remained silent on the drive out, both embroiled in their own thoughts. When Clint stopped the Jeep and pointed out across the grassy field, Blair was out of her seat before he could turn off the engine. She looked across the pasture toward the twenty-six-year-old horse.

"He's sleeping," Clint explained.

"He can still see well enough, but the old guy's pretty deaf."

"Dear old thing." She approached the horse slowly, and as the elderly stallion woke up, he observed her with large, brown eyes. Deciding he liked what he saw, he sashayed toward them.

She rubbed his neck with a long, gentle stroke. "Hello, boy," she murmured. "Oh, Clint, he's so sweet."

"He always has been, to hear Jason tell it. And what a ham! People come by every day to visit him. He'll actually pose while they take his picture."

Blair's expression sobered. "I suppose we'll have to stop that for a bit, won't we?"

"I'm afraid so," he agreed.

"Poor baby," she crooned. "You're going to think you've been forgotten."

We'll visit you every day, though. And tomorrow we'll bring a camera."

"A camera? What the hell for?"

"To take his picture. We don't want him to get depressed because he misses posing."

He wondered if she was speaking from personal experience. "Are you going to miss it?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh, Clint, if I never see another camera lens, it'll be too soon," Blair laughed.

"You won't miss the fame?"

"The fame isn't all it's cracked up to be," she said.

"At least you don't sit home on a Saturday night."

Blair looked up at him, her tawny eyes trying to make him understand that she hadn't found many men who were willing to get to know Blair MacKenzie.

"I don't date much."

"Why not?" he inquired. Suddenly he had to learn if there was someone special in her life.

She shrugged. "You don't want to hear about my life, Clint. I promise, it would bore you to death."

He reached out, his knuckles stroking a light path up her high cheekbones. "You could never bore me, Blair," he said. "I want to know everything about you."

Blair couldn't miss the desire in Clint's tone. "Why?" she whispered.

"For the same reason you want to know everything about me," he answered. "Because you're trying to figure out why your world spins a little crazily every time you're in the same room with a guy who was sent away for killing his wife."

She blanched. "How did you know I had heard about that?"

"Simple. I knew Ramsey would make certain you heard his side. When you came into the den after talking

with Marni, you were as pale as driven snow and you wouldn't look me in the eye. Then, back in the barn, when I rejected the idea of calling the police, for an instant there you tried me and found me guilty."

"That's not true. I never believed a word of that story."

"Some of it's true, Blair."

She forced herself not to flinch. "Oh?"

"Heather was killed. I was found guilty and spent six months in prison."

"But you didn't do it."

He looked down at her. "You're that sure? When twelve men and women decided otherwise?"

Blair nodded. "I'm positive."

Clint exhaled, and she realized he'd been holding his breath. "I want to get it all out into the open, but suddenly I'm starving. How about you?"

Clint laid a blanket out under a tree as Blair pulled out Mildred's crisp, golden fried chicken, a bowl of pasta salad, a dish of fresh vegetables, deviled eggs and thick slices of home-baked bread.

"Mildred still cooks as if she's feeding that brood of hers," Clint said.

"Oh, my God," Blair gasped, "devil's food cake! I cannot resist it. I'll be as big as the Goodyear blimp before long."

"I'll make a deal with you," Clint suggested. "You eat whatever you want, sweetheart, and I promise to watch your figure for you." His gray eyes held a pleasant leer.

"Only if I can watch yours for you," she returned.

"You keep looking at me that way and I'm going to forget all about lunch and start in with dessert."

Blair could not miss Clint's response to the silken net settling down around them even as she felt her own body warming at the idea of making

love to him right now, on the plaid blanket, under the vast expanse of blue sky. But they both knew it was too soon.

"I promised to tell you about Heather," he said finally.

"Did you love her?" Blair asked.

"No. But I thought she was carrying my baby."

"Oh."

"She miscarried. I cried when it happened. Can you believe that?"

Yes, she answered silently, remembering his tenderness in the barn. *I can believe that.*

"I was stunned by how much I wanted that baby."

"There was always the opportunity for other children," Blair pointed out softly.

"No, there wasn't. Heather had the doctor make certain of that. When she told me, we got into a hell of an argument over it, and then she told me it hadn't even been my child."

Blair was speechless.

"You're wondering if I was angry enough to kill her," he said.

She shook her head. "I've already told you, Clint, I don't believe that story."

"To Heather, seduction was what kept life interesting. I knew about the other men in her life and looked the other way. She resented anything or anyone who meant more to me than she did."

"And Risky Pleasure did."

"Yeah. And Heather hated the idea. She grew more and more jealous of Risky Pleasure and started telling everyone that I was obsessed with the filly. She'd get drunk at parties and say I'd threatened her, to force her to give me the money to buy the filly from Jason."

"Oh, Clint... Let's not talk about it anymore," Blair said, hating the anguish she saw in his face.

"It's important that I finish," he insisted. "Because I don't want it hovering between us." He went on, "When Heather didn't show up for a few days, it never occurred to me to call the police. It wasn't the first time she'd taken off. But when her body was found in that motel, I was the logical suspect."

"You were convicted on circumstantial evidence?"

He gave her a mirthless smile. "The real world isn't like Perry Mason, Blair. But Jason never doubted my innocence. He had investigators combing the country, trying to find the last man Heather had been with."

"I'm glad you weren't entirely alone," Blair said quietly, wondering if she had misjudged her grandfather.

"I'd been in prison six months when one of them ran across an assault charge in Fresno. A woman was accusing a man she'd met in a singles bar of beating her up. She said the man had bragged that he'd already killed one woman. It took a while to prove the case, but finally, when faced with all the evidence, the guy confessed."

"Clint," Blair said, "would Ramsey have any reason to hold a grudge against you, even so?"

"You're thinking he might be behind all this." Clint shook his head. "I've thought the same thing. I've even confronted him with it. He denies it, of course. And he wouldn't have any reason to be pulling the same stunts over at Matt's. It doesn't make sense."

They fell silent, and Blair's mind tossed the problem around like a leaf caught in a whirlpool.

"Ready to go back?" Clint asked finally.

"I suppose so," she murmured, accepting his outstretched hand.

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CLINT COULDN'T get Blair out of his mind as he attended to the afternoon feeding. He was admittedly fascinated by the woman.

"There you are!" As the all-too-familiar voice of Ramsey Blackwood jerked him from his thoughts, Clint slowly put down the grain bucket.

"Even a rattlesnake gives a warning before it attacks, Blackwood."

The man's eyes narrowed wickedly. "When I suggested a little romance might go a long way toward convincing a woman to change her mind, I didn't expect you to make it an Olympian sport."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Clint grated out.

"Your receiving fifty percent of this farm, of course. Tell me, Hollister, did you just ask for it, or did you let the lady believe it was all her idea?"

"What?"

The attorney's lips pursed into a charade of a smile. "Now you're going to tell me you didn't know."

"Not only did I not know, I don't believe it."

"Well, it's true. She called me before dawn this morning and instructed me to make out the papers."

"Do you have them with you?"

"Of course."

"Let me see them."

"They're not yours."

"Let me see them, or I'll break your fingers, taking that case away from you."

"I'd press charges," the lawyer warned.

"You do that, counselor. It sure as hell wouldn't be the first time." He moved forward.

"I made a mistake, Hollister. I honestly thought you were guilty." The man backed away.

"Don't give me that. You just wanted me out of here because I wouldn't encourage Jason to buy into your crazy investment schemes."

"You owed it to Heather to try. I offered you a generous commission on every one of those deals. You could have been set for life. How happy do you think she was, living here as the wife of a hired hand?"

"I'd say about as happy as she was living in that La Jolla mansion of yours. I saw the scars on her wrists. She was in trouble long before I stepped into the picture. Now, I'd like to see those papers."

BLAIR WAS ON the phone when Clint entered the kitchen.

"That's okay, Marni," she was saying. "Stay as long as you like. I'm glad you're having a good time."

She hung up, a fond smile curving her lips. "Now that's a pair I'd never have imagined together. She's not coming home for dinner, by the way."

Blair expected Clint to make some suggestive comment about the two of them having the house all to themselves, but he shrugged carelessly and said nothing.

"Clint, is something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?" He removed the papers from his back pocket. "Your attorney brought these by for you."

"Oh, damn. I wanted to surprise you!" Then her amber eyes widened. "Clint, what are you doing?"

He ripped the papers in half, then in half again, repeating the process until the pieces had drifted over the floor.

"I'm not for sale, Blair. At any price." He turned and walked out of the house.

She stared mutely at the shreds of what had been her special surprise. Then she ran outside and grabbed him by the arm. "What did that mean?"

He shrugged off her hand. "All you rich girls seem to find it amusing to play with people's lives. I thought you were different, Blair, but you're just like Heather, Kate—"

"Just one minute, mister," she interrupted. "How dare you compare my mother with that woman!"

"Kate Langley may not have fooled around on David MacKenzie, but she sure as hell ruined his life."

"She loved him!" Blair shouted.

"Then she should have let him go. But no, she had to trap him into marriage and force him to give up what he probably did better than anyone before or since."

Blair tossed her head angrily. "My father was a good and sweet man, but Irish Rover was obviously a fluke, because he never trained another champion."

Clint's laugh was bitter. "Of course he didn't, you little fool. Jason wouldn't let him."

"But my father left this farm."

"Right. And Jason made certain each farm knew that if it wanted any Irish Rover or Moonglow blood in its stables, it had better not hire David MacKenzie!"

His words came at her like deadly bullets. "My father was that good?" she whispered.

"He was the best."

"I'm selling the farm," she announced suddenly. "Name a price, Clint. Any number from one to ten will do."

"Blair, be serious."

Her eyes were as hard as agates. "Oh, I'm deadly serious, Clint. How does one dollar sound?"

"Blair—"

"Sold, to the man in the gray Stetson." Her smile chilled his soul. "Stop by the house later this afternoon, cowboy, and I'll sign the place over to you and give you the key. Right now I'm going to pack."

She spun around, but Clint caught up with her easily. "Blair, I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

She stared up at him. "My God, Clint, if I'd known that Jason Langley ruined my father's chances to train champions, do you think I'd have set one foot on this farm?" Blair squared her shoulders. "The only reason I got into modeling was because it paid so well. I've been saving for years to start my own stable. Oh, nothing like this, of course. But at least I'll know I bought it with my own money."

"Jason always intended for you to have the farm, Blair," Clint argued. "That's why he wouldn't sell."

"What makes you think I give a damn!" she spat.

"What about your father? He trained you for here, Blair. And according to Ben Winters, you're ready. I've talked with him, and he had nothing but praise for you—even if you are a woman."

She groaned. "I've heard that before."

"Then you'll stay? It's what your father would have wanted."

Blair thought back to how diligently her father had worked with her, teaching her everything he knew about Thoroughbreds. Clint was right. Her father had been preparing her to train champions; to return to this farm to claim her birthright. If she let him down now, she'd be guilty of the same

unbending attitude that had characterized Jason Langley.

"I'll stay," she agreed reluctantly. "How about you?"

"I don't want fifty percent of your farm, Blair."

"I need you," she protested. "I'm not ready to train all these horses by myself."

"Then I'll stay on for as long as you need me." He turned away, continuing toward the training barn.

IT WAS AS IF both Clint and Blair had decided to work overtime to keep their relationship on a strictly professional level. They worked well together, she acknowledged. Fortunately, they shared the same ideas about training Thoroughbreds, except for the hay storage.

Blair reminded herself of that one morning while watching the workouts. Clint was standing next to her at the fence surrounding the oval track.

"I meant to tell you something," he said as Matador came charging past.

"What?" she murmured, her gaze shifting to her stopwatch.

"I'm building a single-level hay shed between the barns."

Her eyes widened. "Really? What made you change your mind?"

"Nothing. I always felt the same way you did," he admitted. "It was Jason who refused to consider it."

She studied Clint appraisingly. "Why didn't you tell me that when I first brought it up?"

He grinned. "I didn't want you to get the idea I'd let a woman walk all over me."

"Well, I never thought that. You gave me some rough moments, Clint. I thought we'd never be able to work together."

"Neither did I. But it looks as if we were both wrong. I think we make a pretty good team, Blair."

His deep voice caressed her name.

"Me, too," she said softly.

"Blair..." Clint hesitated, trying to choose his words carefully. He didn't want her to run off, but he was also going crazy from wanting her. Marni had been spending almost all her time at Matt's. That left the two of them alone in the house, their bedrooms just a few feet apart.

He'd been waiting for her to come to him, but so far, Blair was demonstrating a streak of Langley determination that made him want to wring her lissome neck.

Blair found herself trapped and wondered how long she could continue to fight her rebellious body. In fact, she considered with brutal self-honesty, if it were only her body that mattered, she might give in. But she couldn't risk a brief, passionate affair.

She was trying to find the words to explain this when Matador's high whinny startled her. The gelding had taken off as if the devil himself were after him, and Blair gasped as she saw the young girl, Annie, hanging on for her life.

"Clint!" Blair grasped his arm. "He's not slowing down at the fence!"

Matador suddenly swerved, throwing the rider against the rail. She fell to the ground, and Blair and Clint prayed the wild-eyed horse wouldn't crush her.

"I'll get him," Jerry cried, taking off after Matador.

"Jerry can handle Matador," Clint assured Blair as they ran toward the fallen rider. "He used to groom him."

The young girl was sitting up, holding her arm. "I'm sorry, Ms. MacKenzie, Clint," she said. "But he didn't give me any warning. One min-

ute we were going along fine, then he took off as if he'd been stung."

"Don't worry about that," Blair said. "How are you?"

"I think I broke my arm," Annie said. Clint agreed.

"Can you walk to the garage? We'll take you to the hospital."

CLINT AND BLAIR were directed to the waiting room by a nurse who assured them that Annie's fracture was a simple one. Blair paced the floor, feeling inexplicably guilty.

"You didn't throw her into that fence, you know," Clint said, "but I know you're pacing a path in that tile trying to figure out how you could have prevented Annie's accident."

"Is that what you think it was? Another accident?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I only know you shouldn't feel guilty."

Blair sank into a chair. "You really don't think Matador's spooking like that was an accident, do you?"

"Do you?" he countered. "Annie's been riding him every morning for a year. He's never given her any problem."

"Do you think it might have been a hornet? Or a wasp?"

"Not in that early morning air. It was too cold."

"Oh," Her tone echoed the depression she saw in his eyes. Just then, Jerry appeared in the doorway.

"Is she all right?" His young face was a mask of concern.

"She's going to be fine," Clint assured him.

"If only I had been riding Matador..." Jerry began.

"The two of you are really something," Clint said. "Please get it through your heads that you're not to

blame. Now, why don't you go retrieve Annie and we'll get out of here."

Jerry's eyes lit up as he left the waiting room.

"It appears we have a case of young love on our hands," Blair smiled.

"It used to be a problem when Annie worked for Matt," Clint allowed.

"Jerry was over there all the time."

"Annie used to work for Matt?"

"She exercised Northern Lights."

At that moment Annie appeared, forearm in a cast. Jerry hovered beside her.

"I suppose you'll be sending me home," Annie said. "I can't ride."

Blair put her arm around the girl's thin shoulders. "Don't worry about that. Until you're back on the track, there are scads of things for you to do, aren't there, Clint?"

"THAT WAS NICE of you," Clint said that evening as they sat watching a movie in the den.

"Nice?" she repeated.

"Keeping Annie on. You know she's useless right now."

"That's not true at all," Blair countered. "She happens to be a whiz at figures. I've got her helping me with the books." She arched a brow. "Although I still haven't figured out some of the entries. Like 'high tower.' My grandfather never owned a horse with that name, did he?"

"Never."

"Well, whatever it was, he spent more than a million dollars on it last year."

Clint expelled a low whistle.

Blair focused her attention on the movie again. She'd seen *Chinatown* so many times she could probably recite all the actors' lines verbatim. Then a faint idea began to flicker on the edges of her mind.

"Clint? Have any of the farms around here sold in the last few months?"

"A few. It's getting harder to make a profit these days."

"Did they all sell to the same person?"

"I don't think so." Clint eyed her with interest. "Why?"

"I don't know," she replied cautiously. "Perhaps it's just this movie, with Jack Nicholson tracking down all the bad guys who are buying up Los Angeles. . . ."

"Jason was approached last month, but he turned the offer down," Clint said, the wheels beginning to spin in his head. *Blackwood. It had to be.* "Want to go into town tomorrow morning?" he asked suddenly.

"Let me guess—the county recorder's office."

He grinned. "It's amazing that you can have so many brains in that gorgeous head."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment." Blair pointed the remote control at the television. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

"Want some company?" he asked, his eyes gleaming.

"Just when I was starting to think you were one of the good guys."

"I am," he assured her. "Why don't you quit playing hard to get, sweetheart, and I'll show you exactly how good I can be."

Her soft smile didn't waver. "You're incorrigible."

His thumb lightly stroked her throat, causing her pulse to leap beneath his touch. "Aren't you going to kiss me good-night?" he asked.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

Their eyes met—hers darkly gold, his brightly silver—in a jeweled mo-

ment that was like nothing Blair had ever experienced.

His lips were warm, so marvelously warm; his touch was gentle, without being hesitant. Clint Hollister was kissing her as if it was his perfect right, and as Blair's arms reached up to encircle his neck, she could think of no reason why she shouldn't be doing this. Finally, after what could have been a few moments, an hour or an eternity, they came up for air, each appearing abnormally shaken.

"Wow," he murmured. "I think we're playing with fire, Ms. MacKenzie."

Her confused gaze mirrored his own. "I think so, too, Mr. Hollister." It was a whisper.

"So what do you suggest we do?"

It took every bit of Blair's willpower to resist the dark hunger in his eyes. "I suggest we both get a good night's sleep. Things always appear clearer in the morning."

"Are you saying I won't still want you?"

Blair shook her head. "No, I'm saying that in the morning perhaps we'll both have enough sense not to do anything about it."

BLAIR AND CLINT were given little time to ponder their changing relationship. They spent the next day in the basement of the county recorder's office, poring over stacks of dusty files.

"I found another one," Blair's tone was flat, instead of exultant, as it had been at the beginning of the search.

"Recognize the name?"

"No. Guardian Development Corporation. Does that ring any bells?"

"Not a one," he admitted. "So far we've come up with seven sales to seven different developers, all in the

same general location. I was hoping we'd find the answer in here."

"All this has happened so suddenly," Blair said wearily. "Just a few weeks ago I was sitting at my kitchen table in Manhattan with my accountant, trying to come up with the money to buy a small farm somewhere. Now..." Her voice drifted off.

"Accountant," he said. "Let me see your list."

She handed it over.

"I think we've just found a loose thread," he said. "This one."

"Hanson Properties?"

"That's it. You've been sorting through Jason's books. What's his accountant's name?"

"Brian Hanson."

"Bingo!" he exclaimed. "We'll check the incorporation records to see who the officers of Hanson Properties are. If one of them is Brian Hanson, we'll know we're on the right track."

"And if it isn't?" Blair was suddenly very tired.

"Then it's back to the drawing board."

An hour later, Blair found the answer. "Well, there goes that idea," she muttered. "The Hanson of Hanson Properties isn't Brian. It's Robin."

Before Clint could answer, the door to the records room opened, and an officious-looking woman filled the space. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave," she said. "We close at five o'clock."

Clint groaned. "We'll have to come back tomorrow."

Blair nodded, trying to look enthusiastic. She failed. As they walked out into the bright afternoon sunshine, the thudding of her headache only increased.

"You must be starving," he said. "We'll stop for something on the way home."

Fifteen minutes later, she was too tired to be aware of what she was eating. Seeming to sense her mood, Clint didn't try to keep a conversation going, and for that she was grateful.

AS TIRED as she was that evening, Blair found sleep an impossibility and decided instead to catch up on the local news. The papers had been stacking up all week.

Although not a fan of society-page gossip, Blair had spent too many years modeling not to notice a photograph of women in expensive evening gowns, hosting a fund-raising ball. She skimmed the caption, paying scant attention to the names, then went back to one. Holding her breath, she quickly scanned the accompanying article, then ran outside to find Clint.

Blair located him in the smaller of the two training barns, currying Risky Pleasure.

"I've been looking all over for you," she said, panting.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Look!" She shoved the newspaper page into his hands.

"Society Ball to Benefit Less Fortunate," he read. "So? Don't tell me we have to go. Heather used to drag me to those things, and I really hate them, Blair."

"Damn it!" she cried. "Read the names!"

The idea struck home. "Robin Hanson?"

"That's not all," she said. "Read the second paragraph."

"The hostesses of the successful fund-raiser were Buffy Meredith, wife of financier Kent Meredith; Robin Hanson, wife of Brian Hanson..." Brian Hanson," Clint repeated. "Damn. I should have remembered her

name! Congratulations, sweetheart, you may have just found the key!"

The paper fell to the floor, and Blair found herself lifted off her feet as Clint gave her a deep, congratulatory kiss. Then he lowered her slowly back to the floor.

"What do we do now?" she asked dazedly.

He grinned. "About what?"

"About Robin Hanson," she reminded him firmly.

"Let's wait until tomorrow night and play it by ear. Brian Hanson is also Matt's accountant," Clint told her. "They're bound to be at this party he's giving for Marni."

THE MAN LAY on his back, smoking a cigarette and staring up at the ceiling. "I still don't like it," he announced.

The woman's fingers were playing in the hair covering his chest. "I find that difficult to believe. Do you realize how many men would sell their souls to be in your position?"

He turned his head on the pillow, his eyes spearing her. "You promised it'd be a piece of cake," he said. "So far, it's been anything but."

"We're making progress," she assured him. "I guarantee that very soon, Clearwater Hills Farm will fall into our laps."

Smothering a frustrated oath, he drew her into his arms, succumbing as he always did to her expert touch.

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ON FRIDAY evening, Blair stood at her mirror, eyeing her reflection. She'd managed to cover up the purple shadows under her eyes that gave away her recent lack of sleep, but a pair of lines bracketed her lips, displaying her tension.

"Blair?" Clint called in to her. "Are you ready?"

"Just about," she murmured. "Come on in."

He opened the door, stopping to stare. Her hair lay loose around her shoulders in a soft, dark cloud. It was thick and wavy, gleaming in the low lamplight. She was wearing makeup, something she had seldom done since her arrival. Her full lips were painted a lush red, her eyes rimmed with slashes of dark kohl. As he approached, he inhaled the heady, evocative scent of Tigress perfume.

"Would I be hanged for a chauvinist if I admitted to a few lustful feelings right now?" he asked in a husky voice.

Holding out her arms, Blair twirled, the red chiffon swirling above her knees. The halter dress plunged to the waist in back, while the front slit allowed a tantalizing glimpse of creamy skin.

"Let's stay home." He grinned wickedly.

Oh, how she'd like that! Blair felt her knees weaken at his look. "What about Robin Hanson?"

At this moment, Clint didn't give a damn about the farm, or Robin Hanson, or any of the problems he'd been having. Every nerve in his body was on red alert, wanting, needing Blair MacKenzie.

He raked his fingers through his hair in obvious frustration. "You're right," he agreed. "Let's go before one of us changes his mind."

It took all Clint's inner restraint not to turn the car around and forgo Matt's party, but he forced his mind onto the problem at hand.

"When we get there," he suggested, "we'll split up. You see what you can get out of Brian Hanson, and I'll tackle his wife."

"That will be quite a sacrifice," she said. "She's beautiful."

"And about as cold as a glacier."

"I'm not even going to ask how you discovered that."

"You don't have to take a woman to bed to know that she's frigid. Or, on the flip side, to realize that some women are much warmer than they'd like to appear."

Blair ignored the message in his silver gaze. "So, what's Brian Hanson like? Is he cold, too?"

"He's good-looking, I suppose—in an Ivy League sort of way."

"Sounds interesting," Blair said. "Perhaps this party won't be so dull after all."

"Don't take your job too seriously, Blair. I'd hate to ruin Matt's party by having to punch out his accountant for getting too friendly with my woman."

Blair stared at him. "You can't be serious!"

"I was only speaking figuratively," Clint muttered.

As she entered Matt's house, Blair wondered if the man actually possessed so many friends, or if half of San Diego County had shown up out of simple curiosity.

"Blair!" He welcomed her with a warm smile. "You look absolutely ravishing tonight."

"Thank you, Matt. This is quite some party. I didn't expect to see so many people."

"You and Marni proved quite a draw," he said. "Speaking of which, there's someone who's been dying to meet you." His attention slid to Clint. "You won't mind if I borrow Blair for a few minutes, will you, Clint?"

"As long as you bring her back," Clint drawled.

"I promise not to let Brian abscond with her," said Matt.

"Have fun," Clint advised her. Blair nodded, allowing Matt to take her hand and lead her across the room.

"Brian," Matt exclaimed heartily, "I'm sure you recognize Blair MacKenzie. Blair, this is Brian Hanson."

The tall, urbane man's blue eyes were bright with masculine appreciation.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hanson," Blair said, restraining herself from jerking her hand away as his thumb brushed provocatively against her palm.

"Call me Brian," he suggested. "I hope we'll become close friends." The message was unmistakable.

Matt cleared his throat. "Well, I'd better go check on the ice." He looked decidedly uneasy as he disappeared into the crowd.

"So," Blair began casually, "you were my grandfather's accountant."

"As well as his friend," Brian replied.

Blair probed a little further. "I've been having some difficulty with the farm's books. Perhaps you can explain a few of the entries to me." She gave him a coaxing, feminine smile.

"I'd be happy to," Brian said. "During business hours. After all, this is a party. Would you care to dance?"

"I'm a little tired," she demurred. "Why don't we go somewhere quieter, and you can fill me in on high tower."

There was a moment of silence, during which Blair couldn't miss the sudden narrowing of Hanson's eyes.

"High tower? It doesn't ring a bell. But that doesn't mean anything. I never was able to keep those horses' names straight."

"High tower isn't a horse."

"Oh? Are you certain?" His eyes suddenly held a core of ice.

"Positive," she said. "Mr. Hollister assured me that there had never

been a horse by that name on the farm."

"Hollister." He spat the name out as if it tasted bad. Then he put his hand on Blair's back and began to lead her toward a pair of French doors.

"What do you know about your grandfather's trainer?" Brian asked the moment they were alone.

Blair shrugged. "I know he's the best in the business."

"Do you know the man's been in prison?"

Hanson didn't pull any punches. "Yes. I also know he was innocent."

"He's still nothing but bad news. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he had something to do with Jason's death."

"If you believe that, why didn't you go to the authorities?"

"With Jason's history of heart trouble, it would be impossible to prove."

"Then why—"

"Jason wanted to sell the farm, but Hollister fought it tooth and nail."

"If he wanted to sell," Blair argued, "why did he leave the farm to me?"

"That was an old will," Hanson explained. "Jason was still planning to leave everything to you. And with the profit he would have made from the sale, you would have ended up an extremely wealthy woman."

"My grandfather really wanted to sell the farm?"

Hanson nodded. "In fact, he was to meet with a group of prospective buyers the afternoon of his death. But he didn't survive." His eyes glittered. "Now do you see why I have my own suspicions concerning Clint Hollister?"

Blair managed a slight nod, reminding herself that nothing would be accomplished by telling this man she knew he was lying.

"I think I need another drink," she murmured.

"I'll get it for you," he suggested immediately.

Blair smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Hanson, but I'd like a couple of minutes alone to freshen up. The problem with being the Tigress Woman is that everyone expects perfection."

His eyes warmed as they took a slow tour of her body. "I'd say you're managing to come very close to that ideal right now, Ms. MacKenzie," he murmured.

She forced a light, musical laugh. "Well, I've enjoyed our little chat. I suppose I'll see you later."

He nodded. "You can count on it, Ms. MacKenzie."

As she wove her way back through the crowd, Blair spotted Clint talking with a tall, willowy redhead she recognized as Robin Hanson.

She was considering going over to them when Ramsey Blackwood confronted her.

"Ms. MacKenzie, may I have a word with you?"

She stifled a sigh, but followed him into Matt's deserted den. "What is it, Mr. Blackwood?" she inquired.

He took the chair behind the wide oak desk. "Your grandfather and I were close friends," he began. "So I feel a fatherly responsibility toward you."

She sat down opposite him. "Now you're going to warn me against getting involved with Clint Hollister," Blair guessed.

"He'd do anything to keep from giving up that filly, Ms. MacKenzie. Or to keep from leaving your farm."

Aware of the acrimony between the two men, Blair considered the source. She was, however, curious about one thing.

"Mr. Blackwood, do you know anything about something called high tower?"

There was a flicker in the depths of his eyes. "Not a thing. Why?"

"It doesn't matter," she said realizing that for some reason he was prepared to lie. "May I ask you one more question?"

"Of course?"

"Did my grandfather intend to sell the farm?"

"That was the plan. But then he suffered that fatal heart attack. Are you considering selling?"

Blair rose. "Not at all," she stated firmly. "I'm here to stay." She made her way to the closed door.

"Ms. MacKenzie?" Ramsey called. "Watch your step very carefully. Clint Hollister can be a formidable enemy."

"I wasn't aware we were enemies."

"You have something the man wants," Blackwood pointed out. "I'd say that puts you in a decidedly perilous position.... But you can always count on me if you need help."

"I'll keep that in mind," Blair murmured.

Her search for Clint was interrupted by a scene she came across as she passed one of the bedrooms. Robin Hanson and Matt were engaged in conversation, although Blair wondered what they could possibly be discussing that demanded such privacy.

"There you are," Clint said as she reentered the living room. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Let's get out of here," Blair suggested suddenly.

Clint's smile faded. "Sure," he agreed.

The phone was ringing as they entered the house. "Hello," Blair snapped into the mouthpiece.

"Blair?" Marni's voice held concern. "Is everything all right? You left before we had a chance to talk."

"Everything's fine," she lied. "I just got a blinding headache and Clint agreed to take me home."

"Oh... Well, I hope you feel better soon."

"I'm sure I will. Thanks, Marni." Blair hung up.

"Want to talk about it?" Clint asked.

"Not really."

Blair settled down into a chair and picked up a novel, pretending to read. Clint waited for Blair to give some clue as to what had gone wrong.

When she sighed for the third time, he said, "Problem?"

"The house just seems empty without Marni."

"She may have been here for two hours since she arrived," he pointed out.

"I know. It's just that..."

"Jealous?" he asked casually.

"Why on earth would I be jealous of my best friend?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, but isn't love the ultimate female fantasy?"

"Not mine."

"Ah, yes," he said, "you're one of those women who never managed to exchange your adolescent love of horses for that of a man."

"What a ridiculous thing to say," she snapped. "Using that line of reasoning, you're so in love with Risky Pleasure you wouldn't want the perfect woman if she fell stark naked into your lap."

Clint was silent. "It's an intriguing scenario," he murmured. "Had you been considering throwing yourself into my lap, Blair?"

"I was speaking hypothetically," she said icily.

He rose wearily. "Of course you were," he agreed flatly. "Doing that would take more guts than you'd ever have." He marched from the room, leaving her to stare after him.

Blair paced the room furiously at first, then she slumped into a chair. Did she appear as heartless as he'd so brutally stated? If so, she had handled things all wrong.

CLINT LAY in bed staring up at the ceiling, wishing he hadn't fallen head over heels in love with a woman as stubborn as Blair MacKenzie. There was a tentative knock at the door.

"Come in," he muttered.

She opened the door hesitantly. Clint sighed and turned on the bedside lamp. "What can I do for you, Blair?" he asked, sitting up.

He wasn't wearing a pajama top, she noted instantly, wondering if he had anything else on. Her mind began to paint erotic pictures, and a soft shade of rose colored her cheeks.

"Blair," said Clint, "what in the hell do you want?"

She gave him a smile like the one Eve must have given to Adam, and her lustrous gaze held his as she slid her robe off her shoulders. She stood inches away from the bed now, clad in a sea-green nightgown with sheer lacy inserts.

"I want to make love with you, Clint," she said calmly.

His eyes had been devouring the soft curves of her body, but now they came back to hers.

"I want you, Blair. I've wanted you since that first moment I saw you standing by Blackwood's car in that tailored suit. I wanted to peel away that false image you wore until you were in my arms, warm and willing." His voice

grew even more husky. "But 'willing' is the word, Blair."

She held out her hands. Her gesture and the desire sparking her tawny eyes were answer enough.

Throwing back the sheet, he left the bed, gathering her into his arms and gave her a long, lingering kiss. As her hands moved slowly across his back, exploring the muscles that went taut under her palms, Blair experienced a warm, fluttering ache to know this man totally. Her hands moved lower, and Clint groaned, pressing her against him, his flesh warming her, his desire making hers flame all the higher.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he complained, his hands caressing her body, making it hum like a live wire.

"Yes," she whispered.

The nightgown fell to the floor in a silky puddle, allowing him a weakening gaze at her firm, uplifted breasts. "Beautiful," he murmured, stroking her satiny skin.

Blair's pulse leaped at his caress; he could feel it under his hands, and it beat against his lips as they explored her flesh, his tongue flicking across her nipple.

She moaned, arching her back, inviting him to take her more fully into his mouth, which he did, moving from breast to breast, treating each in turn to the tender torment.

"Better," he said happily, moving his lips steadily downward.

"Better," she agreed on a gasp as his tongue made a warm, wet foray into her navel.

When he lowered her to the bed, Blair had the sensation of floating; then her mind became languid with a thick, heavy pleasure.

"Beautiful," he murmured again, "so beautiful." He kissed her, a deep, drugging kiss that engulfed her in tides of aching warmth. He lifted his head

and gazed down at her, hands moving over her body in devastating trails that made her arch instinctively, seeking release.

"I've waited too long for this to rush it now," he said softly, and Blair suddenly realized that while she'd come into Clint's room to seduce him, he was now the one doing all the giving.

"I wanted to make love to you," she objected on a tattered moan as his lips discovered a flash point of pleasure on her ankle.

"We've all night," he argued, his tongue tracing a damp path up her leg.

"But your pleasure— Oh!" His teeth had nipped at the delicate cord at the back of her knee.

"My pleasure comes from pleasuring you," he murmured, his mouth loitering at the silk of her inner thighs.

Blair moaned his name, twisting to find relief; his teasing caresses were driving her to the point of despair. The deepening ache had turned into a steady, pulsating throb, moving through her body like heated honey; and when his tongue finally stabbed into the core of her, she felt something shatter within.

She cried out for him to hold her, to make her safe, and Clint obliged, taking her into his arms and murmuring into her ear. Slowly she stopped trembling, and lying in the circle of his arms, Blair was shaken by a sudden renewal of desire that shot through her like a white-hot flame. Her body was acutely, fiercely, alive.

Clint was stunned by Blair's sudden change in mood as her hands, which had been gently stroking his body, turned greedy, drawing muffled groans from him as they sought to discover intimate secrets.

Blair marveled at his strength as he wondered at her softness, her fingers exploring every taut muscle, every

straining sinew. She moved her fingers over him, and when that wasn't enough, her lips followed the heated path her hands had forged, tasting the intoxicating tang of his warm male flesh. Her teeth nipped at his moist skin, and when her tongue stroked away the little marks, Clint's body was wracked with a series of harsh shudders.

"Blair, I can't take much more," he warned, reaching for her in an attempt to end this tantalizing torture.

She easily avoided him, rising to her knees, her hair a dark curtain that brushed over the skin of his chest with a mind-blinding touch. Blair had never known such power, and as her avid mouth followed the dark arrow of hair downward, bliss just a moment away, she became alive with savage passion.

When her lips embraced him, Blair was suddenly aware of a new sensation, that of possession. She wanted him. Not just for these few moments of unrestrained passion, but forever. He was hers, only hers, and the idea was so thrilling that she threw her body onto his, pressing against his burning flesh, moving against him until Clint could stand no more.

He turned her over on her back, his blood transformed to flames as he took her, driving her into the softness of the mattress with a hunger that transcended all bounds. Her long legs wrapped about his hips, she matched his strength with hers, his soaring passion with her own, until together they crested, their exultant cries smothered by each other's lips.

Afterward, the shudders continued to course through her body. Lying passively in his arms, Blair could feel the still-wild pounding of his heart against her breasts.

Clint looked down at her. "I knew there was a tigress lurking in that beautiful body."

Smiling, Blair stroked his cheek. "It just took the right man to bring it out."

He pressed his lips against hers. "It's us," he murmured. "We make the magic together."

She sighed happily. "That's true. I've never known anything like it."

They fell silent, smiling at each other, lost in their own memories of what they'd just shared.

"I love you." They said it together, as attuned in their need to state their feelings aloud as they had been in everything else. Clint looked down into her soft, loving gaze, and suddenly his mind churned up the sight of that pitchfork.

"What's the matter?" she asked softly.

"I can't lose you, Blair."

She looked puzzled. "I'm not going anywhere," she said.

Clint refused to allow himself any more thoughts of the problem that had begun with the farm and now encompassed his entire life. Nothing would happen to her, he swore. He'd see to it.

As he stared down at her, the icy feeling of trepidation was replaced by a wild surge of need, and he took her again, desperately, urgently.

BLAIR WAS dreaming of a stable of winning Thoroughbreds racing down the track. She and Clint were on the sidelines, cheering wildly, and when the entire field crossed the finish line together, they were ecstatic.

Clint kissed her before they made their way to the winner's circle—and chaos. All the horses were rearing back, tossing their riders to the ground. Their angry neighs filled the

air, and as they grew more strident, Blair's eyes flew open.

When she realized that the terrified screams were no dream, she pulled out of Clint's arms and ran to the window.

"Oh, my God! Clint, the training barn's on fire!"

He was instantly awake and at her side. "Damn!" And he tacked on a virulent series of oaths as he groped about for his clothes.

Blair slipped her robe on, tying the belt while Clint struggled into jeans and boots.

Together, they ran outside, calling for water to anyone capable of hearing. Clint flung open the barn door, releasing clouds of billowing black smoke. The horses' eyes were wide and wild, their necks bathed in sweat, their mouths foaming with their instinctive fear of fire.

"Here." Blair shoved the sheet she'd pulled from the bed into Clint's hands. "I thought this might help."

"Thanks," he said, tearing it into long strips. "You take one side and I'll take the other. Where in the hell is everyone, anyway?"

Blair grabbed a handful of the makeshift blindfolds and tied one of them around Star Dancer's wild black eyes. It seemed to take hours, but finally he was outdoors, breathing in the fresh air, his chest heaving with exertion. By now the crew had arrived.

Blair ran back to the barn, where three more horses were being evacuated by grooms. She did some quick calculations. They should be able to save the horses.

Someone ran by, dragging a large hose into the barn and turning it on the bales of hay from which the dense, acrid smoke was pouring.

Everyone worked at a frantic pace, and finally Clint led Storm Warning

from the barn. The stallion's skin was charred to a hateful black crisp. She grabbed a hose and began running cold water onto the horse's face, neck and eyes while Clint ran for ice and blankets.

As they worked, Blair was unaware of the tears pouring down her cheeks. She couldn't remember when she'd been so glad to see anyone as she was when Bill Collins arrived.

"Jerry called me," the vet explained.

It was a long and tiring night, since more than once it looked as if they'd lose the stallion, but by sunrise the swelling had gone down and his skin was moist.

"I'm slowing the IV," Bill informed them. "For now, all we can do is keep an eye on him. He's going to need a lot of attention over the next several weeks, though."

Blair and Clint nodded wearily.

"Thank God the others are safe," she murmured.

"Thank *you*. If you hadn't wakened when you did, it could have been a real disaster."

"It was meant to be a disaster, wasn't it?" she asked softly, shivering as she considered their unseen enemy out there, lurking somewhere in the darkness.

Clint didn't answer; no answer was necessary.

"I must check Risky Pleasure before we go in."

Blair nodded, taking his hand. They went over to the smaller barn that had escaped the fire.

But Risky Pleasure's stall was empty.

THE COMMOTION had not gone unnoticed, and several neighbors had arrived on the heels of the pumper truck,

ready to help. Hours later, only Matt and Marni remained.

Blair stared blankly at the glass her friend had pushed into her hands.

"It's brandy," Marni said. "It'll help."

Blair thought nothing would help right now, but at Matt's coaxing she gave in, feeling an explosion of warmth when the alcohol hit her stomach.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she said suddenly.

Clint reached out for her, but Marni told him, "I'll take care of her. You sit down before you drop."

Marni led Blair to the bathroom, then stood back as the combination of smoke, fear and despair made her ill.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Don't be silly," Marni scolded.

"You've been through a terrible ordeal. You can't always be in control, Blair. The sooner you learn that, the happier you'll be."

"You're right," she surprised her friend by saying. "Clint said almost the same thing to me. Now I've got to help him find Risky Pleasure." Blair struggled to her feet.

"What you need to do is rest," Marni countered, following her back to the kitchen.

"Feeling better?" Matt asked Blair.

"A little." Her voice was still not strong.

Clint managed a weak smile. "Shouldn't you be lying down?"

"Probably." She moved beside him, running her fingers through his smoky hair.

"You've no idea who's doing all this?" Marni asked.

"We had a couple of ideas," Clint said, "but they're not panning out too well." Suddenly he sat up. "Jerry!"

"What?" the others asked in unison.

Clint turned to Blair. "Did you see Jerry anywhere around?"

"Yes," she said. "I saw him working with Annie when we first discovered the fire."

"Did you see him later?"

"Now that you mention it, no. Oh, Clint, you don't think he set that fire, do you? Jerry would never hurt any of the horses. And you know how he adores Risky Pleasure."

"I thought he did. Let's go check." Jerry's room was empty.

"He's gone," Blair stated flatly.

"With our horse." Clint's voice trembled with rage.

"Perhaps he just took her out for a while to calm her down," Blair suggested.

"Sure," Clint shot back, "tell me another!"

Just then a police cruiser pulled into the driveway. "We'd better go talk to them," Blair said.

After the police had taken their report, Marni stated firmly, "You two need some sleep. Matt and I will try to find out if anyone else around here knows what Jerry was up to."

WITH BLAIR and Clint safely asleep and Marni taking a nap in her old room, Matt sat alone in the den. For the past two weeks he'd been feeling as if he were slowly, inexorably, sinking into quicksand. Heaving a weary sigh, he dialed Robin Hanson. "That was a lousy thing to do," he said.

"It was necessary," she amended. "Remember, darling, nice guys finish last."

"What the hell did you do with Risky Pleasure?"

"I assume she's still in residence at the farm."

"Don't play coy. You know as well as I do she's disappeared."

There was a long silence. "That's an interesting twist," Robin murmured. "But we didn't have anything to do with it. It's a delicious idea, though. He must be frantic."

"Do you think Blackwood's behind it?"

"Quite honestly, I wouldn't have thought he had the guts, but you never know, with several million dollars at stake."

That's for sure, Matt considered bleakly as he hung up, wishing he'd never gotten involved in this mess to begin with. When he'd first been approached by Hightower to sell his land for the site of a new electronics factory, he'd believed it was the answer to all his prayers. He'd never expected things to get out of hand this way.

THE FOLLOWING days blended together into an exhausting combination of vigil and work. Clint and Blair rotated shifts, taking turns tending to Storm Warning while the crews cleaned up the mess left behind by the fire. Neither was surprised when the fire department ruled the blaze arson—or when the police failed to locate Risky Pleasure. The filly seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"She has to be somewhere," Blair muttered one morning as she exited the shower. "What about Annie's family?" she asked Clint.

"I told you, they all live here in San Diego. Besides, the police... Damn!"

"What is it?"

"There's a grandmother. Annie's so Americanized, I tend to forget her family came from across the border."

"And the grandmother still lives there?"

"Tijuana, I think. But I'd better call Matt."

As he took up the phone, Blair put her hand on his arm. "Don't do that," she advised.

"Why not?"

"There's something I meant to tell you about."

She told him of Brian Hanson's assertion at Matt's party that Jason had intended to sell the farm, a fact that had been seconded by Ramsey.

"What has that to do with Matt?" Clint demanded.

Blair told of the scene she'd witnessed. "I can't prove anything is going on between them, but it just didn't look right," she stated quietly. "What if Matt's behind all this?"

"That's a harsh accusation, Blair."

"I know," she whispered.

"I can find out where Annie's grandmother lives from her parents. But Matt's always been a friend," he said. "I hate what I'm thinking."

"Me, too," said Blair.

AS THEY DROVE toward the border that afternoon, pulling an empty horse trailer in case they were lucky enough to find the pilfered filly, Blair attempted logic. Writing down all the pieces they'd found of this puzzle, she sought a workable whole.

"That's it!" she said suddenly. "Hightower! We've been looking at it all along!"

"Would you care to explain?" asked Clint.

She read off the company names of new property owners in the area. "Hanson, Ingram, Guardian, Henderson, Thompson, Owens, Western, Evergreen and Randall. The first initials spell out 'high tower.'"

"I'll be damned. So it *is* all one company."

"One company that seems determined to buy up every last piece of

property out here. They're not going to run *me* off," she declared.

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"THIS CERTAINLY explains all the illegal aliens," Blair murmured as they drove past rows of shanties made of tar paper and flattened oil drums. The dark gray storm clouds overhead only added to the bleak scene.

When the view became more rural, she watched little pastures that housed chickens, donkeys, once in a while a cow or a swaybacked horse. Then one animal caught her eye.

"Clint!" She grabbed his arm. "Look at that horse."

"It sure as hell looks like her," he agreed. "But the star is missing. And the stockings."

"She could've been dyed, Clint. I tell you, that's Risky Pleasure."

"Let's go take a closer look."

As if on cue, the storm hit just as they exited the truck.

"Terrific timing," he growled, making his way to the horse, who was eyeing them with curiosity.

"Wonderful timing," Blair corrected. "Look, Clint!"

As they watched, the water running off the horse turned into dark brown rivulets, and the white star and stockings came into view. Clint broke into a jog with Blair on his heels, both of them calling out to the filly.

"Shoe polish." He laughed, throwing an arm around Risky Pleasure's neck. "The kid used it for camouflage! I think I've finally got everything figured out."

"Well, I'm sure glad someone does," Blair muttered.

"I'll tell you later," he promised. "First let's get Risky Pleasure out of this rain."

Within minutes Risky Pleasure was loaded into the horse trailer. Blair and Clint were congratulating themselves on a job well done when a dark car screeched to a stop in front of them. As two men jumped out, Blair realized she was finally face-to-face with those responsible for all the troubles at the farm. Fury whipped through her. She squared her shoulders and moved toward the men, her topaz eyes shooting sparks.

"Blair!" Clint stopped her in her tracks. One of the men had pulled out a revolver; the other was pointing a shotgun at them.

The taller of the two strangers nodded. "Very good, Hollister. Now, both of you, against the trailer."

Blair and Clint exchanged a look, then slowly did as instructed, turning their backs on the men and placing their palms against the side of the trailer.

"Who are you?" Blair asked angrily. "And what do you want with us?"

"Lady, if you don't shut up, I'm going to do it for you," the smaller man advised.

"And how do you suggest doing that?" she demanded.

"Blair, just do what they ask," Clint insisted, "before you end up getting yourself killed."

"Shut up, Hollister," the man ordered. "Vince, check 'em out."

Vince patted them down, searching for weapons. Clint had to bite down the useless rage that surged through him as the man's hands moved along Blair's body. It wasn't the time. Not yet. He had to keep them talking.

"They're both clean, Phil," Vince told his partner.

"Did Blackwood set you up to this?" Clint asked.

Both men laughed. "He's next on the list. We're going to take care of him after we finish with you."

"You've got a busy day planned."

"You made it easier. It was obvious the kid had swiped the horse, but nobody at Hightower knew where he hid it. All we had to do was follow you two, and here we are."

"What do you want with Risky Pleasure?" Blair asked, stalling for time.

"Hell," Vince said, "we don't give a damn about the stupid nag. But Hanson's worried that the kid knows something."

Blair's blood ran cold as she realized they intended to kill Jerry. As well as her and Clint.

"I'm surprised Matt didn't think of Annie's grandmother," Clint remarked. "He is involved in this, isn't he?"

Phil nodded. "He got a little squeamish and wanted to back out after Vince did in that stallion, but there was always the matter of Langley's death."

"Matt killed my grandfather?" Blair gasped.

"He says it was an accident. Who knows what happened?"

"So Matt was stuck," Clint stated flatly, thinking how he'd always considered Matt Bradshaw his friend.

It didn't escape Clint's notice that they were telling him far too many things about the nature of the incidents at the farm. The only way they'd be so open was if they planned to kill him and Blair.

"You know, all this would've been a lot easier if Vince here hadn't missed with that damn pitchfork. With you out of the way, Hollister, the little lady here would have had to go back to New York on the first plane."

"The pitchfork was meant for Clint?" Blair asked.

"Did you think it was for you?" Phil said. "Hell, there wasn't any reason to do away with you then," he said. "Of course, you know too much now."

"Can't we make some kind of deal?" she asked in a breathless little voice. "I won't tell," she promised, her voice half honey, half smoke as she placed a hand on Vince's arm. "Besides, I can pay you a lot more than Mr. Hanson."

"I don't know...."

"Don't be an idiot," Phil argued. "You'll do what I tell you. And I'm telling you to take care of Hollister while I spend a little time with Miss MacKenzie."

"I take my orders from Hanson, not you," Vince said.

"Is that a fact?" Phil glared up at his partner.

While they'd been arguing, Clint had loosened Risky Pleasure's reins. Suddenly he slapped the horse on the rump, causing her to take off from the trailer at a full gallop. The commotion caught the men off guard, and Clint threw himself against them, knocking Vince to the ground. The shotgun sank ineffectually into the deep mud.

"Hold it right there," Phil ordered, attempting to aim the revolver at Clint, who was rolling on the ground with the larger, but less agile, Vince.

Her captor let out a loud shout as Blair suddenly grabbed his outstretched arm and flipped him onto his back. He landed on a flat rock, gasping for breath like a grounded carp. Blair picked up the gun he'd dropped, her hands trembling.

"Blair, give it to me!"

Her attention returned to Clint, who was straddling Vince. She quickly handed the revolver over, more than willing to allow him to take charge of the situation.

"Get some rope out of the trailer, will you, honey?" he asked, covering the two men.

She retrieved the length of rope quickly, relaxing only when Clint had tightly bound their hands and ankles.

He chuckled. "Jujitsu? Why didn't you tell me you could do that?"

Blair smiled. "I was saving it in case you ever got out of line."

"There are a lot easier ways to get me on my back, sweetheart," he drawled.

"Really?"

"Really. All you have to do is ask."

Clint turned to see Risky Pleasure walking across the field, Jerry and Annie seated on her bare back.

"I'm sorry," Jerry said as he slid to the ground. "It was a lousy thing to do. But all I could think of was getting Risky Pleasure away from the farm to where she'd be safe."

"You had us worried to death," Blair told him.

Clint pressed a finger against her lips. "It's all over. And despite everything, Risky Pleasure is safe and sound."

"Thank God," Blair said fervently. "We may have you two to thank for that," she told them with a slight smile.

"Come on," Clint suggested. "Let's take these thugs into town and go home."

IT TOOK the remainder of the day to get the papers to bring Risky Pleasure back across the border. But the next morning Clint and Blair were sharing breakfast in the farm's sunlit kitchen.

"All the time I thought it was Blackwood," Clint mused aloud. "I never suspected Matt."

"Well, Ramsey wasn't exactly innocent," Blair pointed out. "After all,

he had gone in with Brian Hanson to skim funds from the farm and divert them to Hightower properties."

"Yeah, but he honestly thought he was doing Jason a favor," Clint said. "The old man wouldn't agree to invest in the company, so Blackwood figured that once he could show the profit, Jason would admit he'd been wrong. . . . Quite a pipe dream."

He knew that if Jason Langley could ever have admitted that, he would have invited Blair and her parents back to the farm years ago.

"Yet Ramsey had no idea that Hightower was behind the drive to buy up all the land," Blair observed.

"It only proves there's no honor among thieves."

"You don't really think they killed him, do you?"

"Uh-uh," Clint patted her hand. "Jason knew he had only a short time left to live."

"What's going to happen to Ramsey now? And Matt? And the men behind Hightower?"

"The Hightower people have so many racketeering charges against them, they'll be lucky to get out of prison this century. Matt has turned state's evidence, so he's guaranteed immunity from prosecution, although he'll have to live with what he did for the rest of his life."

"Poor Marni," Blair murmured.

"It must have been hard on her."

Blair sighed. "It was. But I think it did her some good. She's determined to get her life in order."

"What about Ramsey?"

Clint shrugged. "He'll be disbarred, but since he wasn't in on any of the other crimes, he'll probably get off with probation."

She sighed, thinking of the pain he had caused Clint.

"Tired?"

Blair nodded. "Very."

"It's been a rough few days. You should be in bed."

Her eyes met his. "That's not such a bad idea."

*

IT WAS HARD for Blair to believe it was September. The California sun shone as brightly as it had all summer, and the crowds jamming the stands at Del Mar racetrack were dressed in short sleeves.

"There she is!" Blair jumped up, pointing at the big chestnut filly drawing cheers as she trotted past the stands.

Clint's attention remained on his wife. "Damn it, Blair, take it easy. All that jumping up and down can't be good for you!"

She knew Clint was only interested in her welfare, but ever since the doctor had confirmed her pregnancy, he'd been treating her like a piece of fine crystal.

"I'm fine," she insisted, waving wildly to Risky Pleasure. "Healthy as a horse."

"And as stubborn as a mule," he grunted.

They shared a brilliant smile, then fell silent as Risky Pleasure and Cimarron were led into the starting gates. There was a long moment of collective silence; then a bell sounded.

"They're off!"

Cimarron leaped forward the instant the gates sprang open and was a full neck in front just two jumps out of the gate. The stallion easily held the lead going into the first turn.

But Annie, astride Risky Pleasure, refused to rush the horse, giving her time to make this her race. As they rounded the bend, Risky Pleasure pulled herself together, striding

smoothly, ranging up to assume the lead.

"I can't watch," Blair buried her head into Clint's shirt, only to peek up again a moment later.

"She's going to be okay," Clint assured her.

The crowd was apoplectic when Annie and Risky Pleasure tucked in and made their move. The young jockey flicked her only twice, lightly, on the shoulder; from then on, the filly seemed to fly. She came charging ahead as the two horses raced past the eighth pole.

Cimarron battled back, hanging on tenaciously, but it was too late. Risky Pleasure stretched out and drove for the wire. She pulled away in the final one hundred yards to win by three-quarters of a length, creating pandemonium in the stands. Even Annie brandished her whip in the air in exultation.

Blair kissed Clint wildly, then some strangers sitting behind her, then a

nonplussed photographer who dropped his Nikon in the commotion. Then she kissed Clint again. After this exchange they made their way through the congratulatory throng to the winner's circle.

Blair threw her arms around the filly's damp neck, kissing the velvety dark nose. Then she turned to Clint, her eyes sparkling like precious gems. "She won, darling! Risky Pleasure really won!"

When the tender scene graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* the following week, Risky Pleasure appeared over their shoulders, her large teeth flashing in a broad, self-satisfied smile. There were even those readers who swore one of the filly's brown eyes was shut in a knowing wink, as if she had something to do with the lovers' happiness, but other readers insisted that idea was preposterous.

Or was it?



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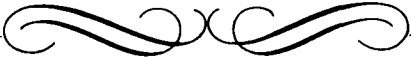


NAN RYAN

Love in the Air



The sizzling repartee that kept the public listening to Kay Clark and Sullivan Ward was even more effective in private. When Sullivan talked, Kay could stay tuned in forever.



Kay Clark stepped into the back seat of the long, sleek limousine. She crossed her legs and settled back against the plush gray upholstery, grateful for the air-conditioned interior.

The chauffeur who met her at Stapleton International Airport had explained that Sam Shults was unable to, but had sent him to take her to her hotel in downtown Denver.

The hot, dry air that greeted them outside was a jolt, even though Kay had been reading about the long, record-breaking hot spell in Colorado. It had been drizzling and only seventy degrees when she'd left Los Angeles just a couple of hours ago. She'd dressed for the west-coast weather instead of the sweltering Denver September.

Kay shrugged out of the long-sleeved navy blazer and dropped it across her lap. The chauffeur looked at her over his shoulder and said, "I'm sure the weather must seem unbearable to you."

"It's hot," Kay admitted and smiled. "But then, Denver's my home. I've seen it this hot before in early September."

"I see." He nodded, maneuvering the sleek car out into the stream of airport traffic.

Kay was glad he made no further attempt at conversation. She wanted only to observe the dear, familiar surroundings of the beautiful city she thought of as home. Finally, she twisted around, lifting her eyes to the majestic Rockies that reached to the

sky on the western horizon. Hot though it was in Denver proper, snow dusted the highest peaks, as the sun began to slip below them.

The car purred to a stop in front of the stately old Brown Palace Hotel. Kay felt her heart constrict. She'd spent the night here only once in her life. As she walked into the imposing, multitiered lobby, her eyes automatically lifted to the balcony at the fifth-floor level, and the door to room 503.

She stepped up to the smiling desk clerk and announced in a weak voice, "I'm Kay Clark. I'm to—"

"Yes, indeed." The man beamed at her. "I remember you. You were on Q102 radio with Sullivan Ward."

"You're right and I—"

"Sam Shults has been calling to see if you've checked in. Welcome back to Denver and to the Brown Palace."

"Thank you, it's good to be back," Kay responded.

"Everyone's excited about you being back on the air with Sullivan Ward." He handed a key to a bellman. "Take the lady to 503."

"No, I... have you another..."

"Is something wrong? Mr. Shults asked that we give you one of our nicest rooms and so I—"

"Room 503 is fine. Just fine," Kay managed. She turned and followed the bellman.

After he'd carefully placed all of Kay's suitcases in the dressing area, Kay locked the door behind him. She took a deep breath, slowly turned and finally let her eyes stray to the king-size bed. It was in exactly the same place it

had been on that night five years before. Kay could vividly recall that the sheets were ice-blue then.

Hurriedly, she crossed the room and peeled the comforter to the foot of the bed. She moaned. Soft, clean sheets of ice-blue looked cool and oh-so-inviting and Kay could see again a long, lean body, unclothed and masculinely beautiful, stretched out in slumber. Handsome face in repose, ebony hair disheveled. Broad, hair-matted chest rising and falling evenly. Hard abdomen and narrow hips; long, powerful legs dusted with coal-black hair.

She'd left him like that on that morning five years ago. She'd tiptoed out of the room without waking him. In all the times she'd thought of him since, she always pictured him gloriously naked in this blue bed.

A huge bouquet of long-stemmed Happiness roses drew her attention to the dresser opposite. The card read:

"Sorry I couldn't meet the plane. The wife and I, along with Sullivan Ward, want to take you out to dinner tonight. Will call for you at 8:30 this evening. Welcome back!" It was signed "Sam Shults."

Kay began to tremble. In exactly one hour she would see Sullivan Ward again.

KAY, AN AIR OF COOL confidence belying her true feelings, swept into the Turn of the Century restaurant on the fatherly arm of a jovial Sam Shults, the general manager of radio station Q102. On Sam's other arm, his wife, Betty Jane, was as happy as he to have Kay Clark back.

The laughing, chattering trio was escorted through the main room of the busy east Denver eatery and up a half flight of stairs into the cheerful garden court.

"Honey, you slide in there." Sam took Kay's elbow. "I'll sit here by mama, and when Sullivan arrives, he'll keep you company."

"That'll be fine," Kay said pleasantly, her stomach jerking at the mere thought of Sullivan beside her.

"Kay, I swear you're prettier than ever." Betty Shults was beaming at her. "I'll bet when Sullivan sees you tonight, that permanent scowl he's worn lately will disappear."

Sam Shults shot his wife a sidelong, silencing glance.

"Pay Betty no mind, Kay," Sam said. "You know how she is about Sullivan. Lordy, you'd think she'd borne him."

"Is Sullivan very unhappy about my coming back?"

"Why, Kay, how could you think such a thing? You—"

Betty Shults interrupted. "Kay, you know I always speak my mind. Sullivan wasn't too thrilled when Sam told him you'd be coming back to be his morning-show partner. In fact, he said—"

"Damn it, Betty, who runs the station, me or you?" Sam summoned a waiter, and looked relieved when he hurried to take their drink order. "Kay, what will you have?"

"Just a glass of white wine," Kay managed weakly. Why should Betty's revelation about Sullivan's reaction be shocking? She'd hardly expected him to be overjoyed.

Kay gritted her teeth. She could take what he dished out. She was no longer a nineteen-year-old kid to be bossed around by him. He'd controlled her almost from the moment he gave her the much-coveted job as his partner on the morning show. She'd been only seventeen years old then. She'd sent in an audition tape just like all the other hopefuls, and, impressed by what he'd

heard, Sullivan had called and asked her to come in for an interview. She could still recall the startled look on his handsome face when she shyly entered his office.

"Well, will you come, Kay?" Betty Shults's voice pulled Kay back to the present.

"I...I'm sorry, Betty. What did you say?"

"Are you all right, Kay? You seem a million miles away." Betty stared at her.

"I'm just fine, really," Kay apologized.

"I just suggested that you come out to the house on Sunday. We could charcoal some steaks and swim in the pool."

"For goodness' sakes, Betty, she just got off the plane," Sam Shults intervened. "Give her a chance, will you? I wonder what's keeping Sullivan. I'm starving and I'll bet you are, too, Kay."

Feeling as though she never wanted to eat again, Kay said, "A little, yes."

"Mr. Shults." The manager of the restaurant stepped up to the banquette. "Sorry to disturb you." He nodded graciously to the ladies. "You've a telephone call."

When Sam returned, looking embarrassed, he said, "That was Sullivan on the phone. He can't make it this evening. He's terribly sorry, but it seems..."

Kay never heard the rest of the explanation. This was going to be harder than she thought.

KAY FELT relieved when the evening was finally over and the Shultses had dropped her back at the Brown Palace. Feeling weary, she kicked off her shoes and eagerly unzipped her silk dress. In seconds she'd completely stripped and stood under a pelting

shower, eyes closed, face turned up to the pounding spray.

Yawning, Kay towed herself dry, slipped on a pair of eggshell crepe pajamas, sat down on the edge of the turned-down bed and stretched. She'd left the drapes open. Only transparent sheers of filmy white covered the tall plate glass. The big, cool suite was suffused with soft light from the tall downtown skyscrapers and Kay, alone in the bed, let her gaze slide slowly around the room. The scent of roses wafted to her, one more reminder of that other fateful night she'd spent here. Then, too, there'd been roses, dozens of roses, all sent by Sullivan Ward.

Roses and champagne and Sullivan. Tears slowly slipping down her cheeks, Kay again let time turn back. She was nineteen years old and she was in this very room.

It had been her last night in Denver. She was to depart the next morning for Los Angeles and the new position at one of the top radio stations there. Sullivan had taken her out to dinner on that last evening, a night of dry August heat and bright moonlight. She'd worn a cool cotton sundress, narrow straps tied in a bow at the back of her neck. Her almost waist-length hair had been pulled into a casual shiny twist and pinned atop her head.

Sullivan, boyishly handsome in a white knit shirt and faded jeans, had honored her wish to dine on sausage pizza at a little Italian place up in the foothills, but long before midnight, knowing she had to catch an early flight, he agreed they should call it a night. Holding hands and growing increasingly silent, they exited from the creaking elevator on the fifth floor of the Brown and went to room 503.

When she reached out to flip on the lights, Sullivan's hand stopped her. He

slowly pulled her fingers to his chest and said simply, "Kay." Then gentle, sculpted lips settled on hers, warm and undemanding. Sullivan again whispered, "Kay, oh, my Kay."

Kay sighed as his kiss became more demanding, filling her with warmth, just as it always did. Her arms went up around his neck. She loved kissing Sullivan. His kisses set her afire; they had from the first. More than once their hunger for each other had made kissing, no matter how wonderful, seem inadequate. Still, Sullivan, though his eyes had looked tortured and his body had trembled with his need, had many times thrust her away from him, stopping short of what they both wanted. Needed.

Not tonight.

Now he was kissing her with unbridled passion and she met his hunger with her own. When their heated lips separated for breath, Sullivan urged Kay toward the bed. She willingly took a seat on its edge and watched as he pulled off his shirt.

He took a seat beside her, a long arm going around her shoulders. "Sweetheart," he said huskily, his hand moving up to the swell of her breasts, "it's our last night. Kiss me like it's the last night, honey. Kiss me, baby."

"Sul," she murmured and put her palms to his smoothly shaven cheeks. Her soft, moist mouth, aggressively open, came up to his. She slowly ran the tip of her tongue inside his upper lip, just the way he'd taught her to do. He groaned and pulled her to him.

At last Sullivan's mouth left hers, trailing fiery kisses across her flushed cheek and finally coming to rest on her ear. "Kay, I want to feel your breasts against me. Just for a minute, sweetheart, just for a while," he said.

Before she could answer, his mouth took hers again, his tongue thrusting

between her parted lips to mate with hers. Deft fingers untied the bow at her nape and gentle, caring hands peeled down the white cotton barrier from between them as his lips left hers.

Unhampered by clothes, Kay's full, high breasts rose and fell with her rapid, nervous breaths, and her bottom lip trembled as she lowered her eyes. "Sul," she began.

"Sweetheart," he soothed, lean hands rising to cup the soft, warm mounds of creamy flesh. "You're so beautiful. Don't be embarrassed with me, Kay. Look at me, darling."

Slowly her eyes lifted to his. While his thumbs teased at the rose-hued crests, she sighed softly and shyly admitted, "That feels good, Sul. So good."

"My sweet baby," he murmured. "Put your arms around me," he instructed as his hands spread lightly on her back, pressing her tenderly to him.

Kay's slender arms clasped him tightly as she gloried in the exquisite delight of Sullivan's warm, hair-roughened chest touching her aching, swelling breasts.

In his kiss was all his love, all his passion. Kay reeled with the intensity of emotions he'd unleashed in her as well as himself. His kiss was hungry, demanding, and when their lips and tongues finally separated, his breath was labored, his sultry eyes almost wild. He pushed her slowly down across the bed, following her.

"My God," he mused, "have you any idea how long I've wanted to see you like this?" A hand was at her breast, gently caressing, a thumb circling the hard peak.

"Sul," she whispered, "I've wanted this, too, I've—"

Her sentence wasn't finished. His lips were on hers again, and Kay's hands were in the thick, dark hair of

his head while her open mouth twisted under his and her tingling torso rubbed unashamedly on him.

Kay wasn't quite certain how or when his practiced, persuasive hands managed to divest her of her lacy panties. Now, a warm male hand was moving up her trembling thigh, a deep, drugging voice murmuring close to her face, "I have to touch you, Kay. I have to, honey. I won't hurt you, I'd never hurt you."

"Yes," was all she could manage, as those long, lean fingers moved unerringly to that sensitive feminine flesh where no man's hands had ever been before. "Yes, yes," she whispered through fevered lips, her blue eyes widening with a new and unbelievable pleasure.

His eyes upon her sweet, flushed face, Sullivan stroked her gently, coaxingly. She writhed and clung to him.

"There, sweetness," he soothed, staying with her, patiently tutoring her, bringing her pleasure. While she tossed her head back and forth and murmured his name, Sullivan continued to take her slowly. He brought her toward release as his heart thudded and his tight jeans strained with the fullness of his aching arousal.

Finally her zenith began and Kay's blue, shining eyes widened with shocked surprise. She clung to Sullivan's shoulders so tightly her long nails cut into his flesh. He smiled down at her, his voice, deep and soft, saying, "Yes, my baby, I'm here. I won't let you go."

When she lay at last limp in Sullivan's protective arms, Kay willingly let him finish undressing her. Moments later they were both naked upon the bed that Sullivan had turned down. With half-emptied glasses of champagne beside them on the bedside ta-

ble, soft music coming from the radio and the scent of roses sweetening the air, they completed the act of love-making upon sheets of ice-blue. Kay knew as Sullivan lowered his sleek, bare body onto hers that the brief pain of his penetration would pale beside the pain of leaving him.

And she was right.

*

AT TEN O'CLOCK the next morning, Kay, dressed in a tailored suit of beige poplin with a wide multicolored belt, walked through the doors of radio station Q102, high atop the Petroleum Club building in downtown Denver. A young woman with hair of auburn and big green eyes looked up, smiled and said, "You have to be Kay Clark!" The woman jumped up from her chair. "I'm Sherry Jones and I've heard so much about you, Ms. Clark. Why, it's like having a movie star in the station."

Shaking her head, Kay laughed good-naturedly. "Sherry, I'm flattered, but I'm hardly a star. Is Mr. Shults busy?"

"Follow me, Ms. Clark." Sherry was smiling happily.

"Morning, Kay." Sam rose to greet her. When they were alone, he said, "Have a seat and let's go over a few things."

"Sam," Kay said, taking the leather chair across from her old boss, "will you level with me?"

"Why, Kay, haven't I always?" He looked puzzled.

"I'm concerned about Sullivan Ward." She looked directly into Sam Shults's soft brown eyes.

His beefy shoulders slumped. "Kay, what can I tell you? We both know that—"

"Sullivan doesn't want me here. Is that it?"

Sam sighed. "Kay, Sullivan is a pro. When you're on the air together, he'll be just like he was before."

"You didn't answer my question, Sam."

"I'm the general manager of Q102. I have to decide what is best for this station."

Kay smiled sadly. "You just answered my question."

Sam Shults smiled with her. "I guess I did. Honey, you and Sullivan will just have to work out any personality problems. I care about one thing—audience."

"Why, Sammy, you're as sentimental as ever," Kay kidded.

HE WAS TALL and slim and graceful. His hair was shiny black except for a sprinkling of silver streaking his temples. His face looked a little leaner, harder and more handsome than ever. At thirty-six years old, Sullivan Ward was at the peak of his rugged masculine appeal. Kay stared at him in awe. And in fear. His icy, handsome face told her he was sorry she'd returned, and Kay had the uneasy feeling he planned to make her sorry, too.

Coolly assessing her, Sullivan finally nodded and said evenly, "Ms. Clark."

"Mr. Ward," Kay returned flatly.

Sam Shults, shaking his head, said, "I'll leave it with you. I've got work to do." Neither Kay nor Sullivan responded.

A deafening silence filled the corner office with Sam's departure. Like wary jungle cats, the two continued to size each other up, standing across from one another. Hands sliding deep into his pockets, Sullivan let his gaze lei-

surely glide over the small blond beauty looking at him.

She was dressed more severely than when he'd last seen her. The suit only hinted at the curves he knew were underneath. A muscle flexed in his jaw as his gaze slid over her high breasts, her narrow waist, her rounded hips. She was a sophisticated, twenty-four-year-old woman. And, God help him, she was more desirable than ever.

Slowly turning his back to Kay, he appeared to be peering out the window. In fact, his dark eyes were closed. "Kay, have a chair," he said at last, and turned around.

The intensity had left the black eyes, but the coldness had not. "There's a few things we'll need to discuss."

He sat down, lounging back in his swivel chair. Kay cleared her throat needlessly and said, "It's great to be back in Denver, Sul—Sullivan."

"Is it?" He lifted a dark eyebrow and his mouth quirked into a hint of a derisive smile. "I'd think old Denver would be a bit tame for a lady who spent the last five years in L.A."

"I'm a rather tame lady, or don't you remember?" Her level gaze met his.

Wide shoulders lifted slightly. "Ah, that's true, but then that was five years ago. I'm sure you've learned a lot, both professionally and personally." His eyes challenged her to deny it.

"Sullivan, I would certainly hope I've progressed professionally. If not, then I'm in the wrong line of work and I don't believe that. It was you who first told me I had potential, and that I should learn and polish and strive to get better each day, each year. That's exactly what I've done for the past five years."

"All finished?" he asked. Her reply was a narrowing of her eyes. Sullivan shook his head. "Good, now maybe

we can get to the business at hand.” Rising gracefully, he slowly circled his desk. Kay tensed as he neared her. He stepped directly in front of her chair and half sat, half leaned on his desk. “Where shall we begin?” he mused.

“Why don’t you give me your little speech about you being the program director of this station and as such you do all the—”

“Damn you, Kay.” He leaned menacingly close. “Sam Shults may have hired you back, but I’m your boss, do you understand me?” Those black eyes were flashing fire. “I will indeed give you my speech and I’d advise you to listen. I’m not quite as easygoing as I once was and I can’t be pushed around, not even by silver-haired beauties with big blue eyes and bigger egos.”

“Sullivan,” Kay interrupted, “will you just wait a—”

“No, Kay, I won’t. We both know why you’re here. Your career took a downturn, you lost your Los Angeles radio deal and you’ve come back down to the minor leagues for a while.” Slowly, Sullivan leaned forward. He put a hand on either arm of Kay’s chair, trapping her. “How long do you plan to stay this time, Miss Clark? Three months? Six? Till you get a decent offer from some radio station in Chicago? Atlanta? Miami?”

Kay looked directly into his eyes. Anger rising rapidly, she lifted her small chin and smiled up at him. “Why, Sullivan—” she leaned closer “—I’ve no intention of doing anything so foolish.” She laughed and shook her silver head dismissively. “New York, Sullivan. The Big Apple. That would be the proper showcase for my talents, don’t you think? That’s where I belong.”

Sullivan’s dark eyes flickered for one brief instant. His hands left her chair

and he stretched to his full, imposing height.

“Baby,” he drawled, “that probably is where you belong. One thing is certain, you sure as hell don’t belong here.”

“All the same, Sullivan, I am here. I’m your partner once again on the morning show and I’ll be in the control room at six o’clock tomorrow. Now, if you’d like to run through a practice play set, or discuss our first show, I’ll sit back down and we’ll go about this like two intelligent professionals. If not, I’ll be going.”

Sullivan nodded. “Let’s play it by ear in the morning. Might make the show fresher.”

“Good enough,” Kay agreed, turned and walked to the door. Pausing, she turned to look back at him. “Sullivan?”

“Yes?”

“I see you still have your chinning bar.” She smiled. “Do you still chin yourself when something’s bothering you?”

Sullivan’s face colored and he ignored her question. His voice soft, he said, “See you in the morning, Kay.”

When Kay left Sullivan’s office and stepped into the corridor, a smiling, attractive woman materialized from an office next door. She smiled warmly at Kay.

“Miss Clark, I’m Janelle Davis, Sullivan’s secretary. If you’ll just come with me, I’ll show you to your office.”

“Thank you, Janelle.” Kay followed the tall, slim woman to a small office all the way down the hall from Sullivan’s.

She’d no sooner placed her handbag in the bottom drawer of her desk than her phone rang.

“Kay, it’s Sam,” came the booming voice. “Hon, I just wanted to let you

know that Benny Brown, our best salesman, just came in with the keys to the car he got for you over at the Porsche dealership." Kay smiled. The car was part of the deal she'd made in her new contract with Q102. "Kay, honey," Sam continued, "a Porsche is all right, isn't it?"

"Sammy, I think I'll be able to make do." She laughed. "I'm thrilled to death, who wouldn't be?"

"Good, Kay. Anyway, it's downstairs in the parking lot. I've got the keys when you're ready to leave."

"As a matter of fact," Kay said, "I need to start hunting for an apartment, so if it's all right with you, I think I'll spend the rest of the day looking at a few places."

"Do that, Kay."

"Sammy, does Sullivan still live over at the Park Lane Towers by Washington Park?"

"Sure does. Why don't you ask him if they have anything available?"

"Hmm," she said, "I will. See you in five minutes for those keys." Kay hung up the phone, retrieved her handbag and left her office, thinking she'd hunt for a place to live as far from the Park Lane Towers as possible.

THE NEXT morning, Kay arrived at the studios of Q102 half an hour early. Dressed in an attractive cowl-necked cotton dress of gold and blue stripes, a wide blue leather belt and matching shoes, she used her key to let herself into the dim reception area. It was eerily quiet.

She crossed the lobby and headed down the long corridor toward her office. Suddenly the hair stood up on the back of her neck. She could sense someone behind her. She whirled

around abruptly and bumped into the hard chest of Sullivan Ward.

Kay let out a little gasp of surprise. Sullivan's hands were on her upper arms, steadying her. Eyes on the level of his throat, Kay's senses were assailed with the scent of his clean, warm skin. Instinctively, she inhaled deeply, loving his familiar yet strange male essence.

As Sullivan set her away from him, Kay looked up at his face. In his eyes was an enigmatic expression. It fled immediately and a look of impatience replaced it.

"I—I didn't hurt you, did I?" she asked.

A mocking grin lifted the corners of his lips. "What do you think?" he said flatly, then turned and walked away.

Kay bit her bottom lip. This was not going to work. An unhappy Sullivan was going to make this first show a disaster. She just knew it. They could no longer work together. She should never have returned.

AT TWO MINUTES before six, Kay left her small office. At the opposite end of the hall, Sullivan did the same. They met at the door to the control room. Wordlessly, Sullivan put a palm to the door and pushed it inward, inclining his dark head.

Kay nodded and stepped past him into the room where bleary-eyed Dale Kitrell was signing off his show. Nodding to the pair, the tired disc jockey said into the microphone, "So that's it for the night people. Be listening again when yours truly, Dale of Darkness, comes back your way." The weary man turned up the volume, letting the last record lead into the 6 o'clock news.

"Hi, folks." He rose, yawned and stretched.

As soon as Dale was gone, Sullivan drew a second chair up beside the one he had just vacated and looked at Kay. "Think you can fill out the federal communications log if I handle everything else?"

Kay slowly circled the control panel, and took the seat directly in front of the console. Swiveling around, she looked up at him and said calmly, "Not only can I handle the FCC log, Sullivan, I can run the board as well. I will cue and spin the records, position and play the tapes and run the proper commercials." She smiled sweetly and added, "You just have a seat beside me and charm your listeners."

"Fine," Sullivan said evenly.

Ignoring him, Kay reached out to spin the cassette carousel, familiarizing herself with the color-coded dots designating the A, B and C songs. Turning back to Sullivan, she said crisply, "Where's the playlist, Sullivan?"

"Why, Kay—" his eyes lifted to hers—"this is Q102. We don't play the hits here. We make 'em, remember?"

"Yes, I know, but what shall I—"

"It's thirty seconds till time, better pick something." Sullivan leaned forward and pulled the mike into position. Heart hammering, Kay snatched a blue-dotted cassette and shoved it into the recorder just as Sullivan flipped open the key and said in that smooth, sexy voice, "Morning, sleepyheads. It's your old buddy, Sullivan Ward. The day we've all been waiting for has finally arrived. There's magic in the Mile High City today."

Sullivan's brooding black eyes went to Kay as he continued. "I'm sure a lot of you remember the beautiful and talented Kay Clark, my morning-show partner back in the good old days here. Well, she's back and I couldn't be happier. For those who have moved to

Denver in the past five years, I'll see if I can't describe Kay for you. She's about five feet three... call it a hundred and two pounds, all in the right places." His eyes were slowly sliding over Kay as he spoke.

"She has the hair of a Christmas angel, all long and silvery. Her eyes are cobalt blue and so enormous you could lose yourself in them. Her nose is turned up just a bit. Her lips are soft and sweet and— Oh, I can't go on. She's Kay Clark, she's breathtaking, she's talented and she's mine. Did I say mine? She's yours, friends, and she's delighted to be back in Denver. Say hello, Kay."

Face flushing, Kay swallowed nervously, leaned closer to the mike and, looking directly into his watchful eyes, said confidently, "Thank you, Sullivan. Hello, Colorado. You'll never know how overjoyed I am to be in my beloved Denver and back on the air with the talented man who taught me all I know."

Kay saw the brief flicker in his eyes and quickly amended, "About broadcasting, that is." Hand trembling, she clutched the mike and concluded, "I'll be seeing all of you old friends real soon, since Sullivan and I plan lots of personal appearances. Keep listening and give us a call now and then to let us know you're there. Now how about a little music?" Kay pushed a button and music filled the control room.

Half an hour later, the phone began ringing off the wall. Raves poured in. Listeners loved the easy banter and great rapport between Sullivan and Kay. Their timing was perfect, as though they'd never been apart. They could practically read one another's minds.

The fire between them still burned. At least in the control room of the radio station.

They took turns answering the busy phones, cuing the records, logging the commercials and talking into their mikes. The four-hour show flew past and Kay was shocked when Sullivan said, "Lead 'em into the last song, Kay. It's two minutes till ten."

When the last record came up in volume, she turned to him—happy, relieved, longing for his approval.

"You're good, Kay, very good. Better than ever," he said, shaking his dark head.

Kay instinctively reached out and put a hand on his dark forearm. "I should be," she said softly, leaning toward him. "You taught me all I know."

Feeling the ripple of muscles beneath his shirtsleeve, Kay drew a sharp breath when Sullivan asked casually, "Have you anything planned for this coming Saturday morning?"

They didn't work on Saturdays.

"Why, no, I don't, Sullivan," she said in a whisper.

"Good," he responded. "There's a charity touch-football game at ten between Q102 and channel ten television. Be a good idea if you'd agree to play."

Disappointed, Kay stammered, "I... why sure, I'll be glad to do it."

Sullivan walked away. "Come by my office and get a Q102 T-shirt. You own a pair of white shorts, I'm sure."

"Yes, but why can't I wear jeans?"

Sullivan paused at the door. "This is show biz, babe. People want to look at you in a tight T-shirt and a pair of shorts that show off your legs."

"Well—" Kay followed him "—maybe I don't want to show off my legs and my... my..."

"Come off it, Kay," Sullivan said coldly. "You rode in a Los Angeles parade in a damned brief bikini that

almost showed your..." He slammed out of the door and was gone.

Kay, face pink, gritted her teeth and stormed out to the privacy of her office. She fumed for several minutes before wondering aloud, "How did Sullivan know about a parade I was in four years ago?"

KAY STOOD on the sunny balcony of her new high-rise apartment overlooking Cheeseman Park and dried her hair.

It was Saturday morning. The week had passed quickly; the hours spent on the air with Sullivan had been exciting, fun, like old times. Off the air, it was a different story. Sullivan had little to do with her and his black mood had gone unnoticed by no one.

Kay was all too aware that Sullivan's bad humor was because she was back, but the depth of his displeasure was puzzling. She could understand his being resentful. She'd been young and very ambitious. When she'd been offered a slot at one of L.A.'s top radio stations, she'd accepted, despite the fact that she was in love with Sullivan Ward.

Over and over again she'd asked him if she was doing the right thing. Each time she'd hoped he'd beg her to stay in Denver. But his answer was always that it was a great opportunity and she must make up her own mind. Even on that last night, when Sullivan had made love to her for the first and last time, he still did not tell her to stay.

Kay shook her head, rose and went inside to dress for the charity football game.

THE REFEREE'S WHISTLE found the center for the Q102 team bent over the ball, hands firmly on the pigskin, knees bent, bottom pointed skyward,

ready to snap the ball to the waiting quarterback who, brown hands reaching between the legs of the nervous center, called the play in a deep and commanding voice.

Kay snapped the ball to Sullivan and the game between the Q102 Spinners and the Channel Ten Glossies was under way. Sullivan rapidly backpedaled, ball in his right hand. Kay, not quite certain what to do next, ran toward the opponents, looking back over her shoulder at Sullivan.

He pumped once, then threw a spiraling pass to his buddy, deejay Jeff Kerns. Perfectly thrown, the ball landed right on target and Jeff managed to run five yards before he was tagged by a laughing channel ten anchorwoman.

Kay clapped happily, lined up for the next play and bent over the ball. She let her eyes slide up to the pair of well-tended brown hands in position between her legs. Sullivan was hunched so closely over her she could feel his body heat, his breath. Kay shivered, bit her lip and looked down again.

Sullivan, his lean body bent close to Kay's, tried just as desperately to keep his mind on the game. It was difficult with that cute rear, clad in white shorts, pointed in the air. It was agony to put his hands near those creamy thighs.

The game continued and Sullivan's performance rapidly deteriorated from brilliant to just plain lousy. Before the first quarter had ended, channel ten was leading Q102 by a score of seventeen to nothing.

Only Sullivan, and perhaps Kay, knew where the problem lay. When he informed her he was changing her playing position, Kay merely nodded.

Sullivan relaxed and became the formidable competitor he'd been in past years. Kay was delighted with her new position and when, later in the

game, he threw her a perfectly aimed pass, Kay took off running for the goal line. She'd gone only a few yards before a muscular blond channel ten salesman caught up with her.

He grabbed for her T-shirt, pulling it hard, and Kay forgot it was only touch football. She tried to wrench away from the grinning, good-looking Dave Kelso. She heard the tear of her shirt just as she hit the grassy ground. The big blond man came crashing down on top of her. Kay, unhurt, laughed and so did he. Kay was on her back, the football still clutched tightly. Kelso was on his stomach, his broad torso partially covering hers.

Fans in the stands were applauding. Teammates from both sides were whistling and cheering. Kay and Dave were laughing uproariously, struggling to untangle arms and legs. When a shadow fell across them, Kay looked up to see a livid Sullivan Ward.

Mouth thinned into a tight line, black eyes snapping, Sullivan jerked her to her feet with such force and speed her head rocked on her shoulders. Strong fingers gripping her arm, he demanded, "What the hell do you think you're doing, Kelso?"

Still smiling, Dave Kelso rose. "Why so edgy, Ward? I didn't hurt her, did I, sweetheart?" He looked down at Kay.

"He didn't, Sullivan, really. It was my fault, I..."

Sullivan ignored her. "Kelso, this girl weighs a hundred pounds, you weigh two hundred. Fall on her again and you'll answer to me, you got that?"

"Meaning?"

"Read my lips, Kelso. Touch her again and I'll come after you. I weigh two hundred pounds, too."

The big blond man's smile stayed in place. "What if I took her out to dinner, Ward?" His eyes went to Kay. "I

was just going to invite her when you interrupted."

Sullivan released Kay's arm. "You do that, Kelso." He turned to walk away. "On this playing field, stay off her!"

KAY, riding back to the station after the game, which Q102 had won, pondered the events of the morning. Sullivan was not in the limo she rode in.

It had been arranged prior to the game that the losing team would treat the winners to beer and pizza at Leo's, the local eatery. Laughing, happy people piled out of the limo and headed directly across the street. Kay watched them go, promising she'd meet them there in ten minutes. In fact, she had no intention of going. She wanted only to be alone, to consider for herself why Sullivan had become so angry when she'd tumbled to the ground with Dave.

Kay saw the other limo, the one Sullivan had taken back, empty at the curb. Its occupants had already streamed into the cozy pub. Kay went up to the studios. They were deserted, save for the weekend substitute doing his air trick. Kay was thankful for the privacy as she headed for her office.

A loud noise from Sullivan's office stopped her at his door.

Obviously thinking he was alone, Sullivan, his face contorted, threw his other shoe across the room. It made the same loud thud as the first one. His back to Kay, he jerked his soiled white T-shirt over his head and threw it after the shoes.

Kay stood watching his beautiful, bare back, sweat-slick and shiny, lift with his breaths. Feeling her eyes on him at last, he slowly turned around and started toward her.

His eyes blazed with an undeniable look of passion that both frightened and excited her. Feeling her knees turn to water, Kay waited, eager for his strong arms to pull her to him, longing for those lips to crush hers.

It never happened.

Stopping directly in front of her, Sullivan said, "Why aren't you at Leo's?" His voice was tired, flat.

"Why aren't you?" she responded softly.

His wide bare shoulders rose, then slowly fell. "Kay," he said, and it was a plea, "leave me alone. Please... please, leave me alone."

*

THAT'S EXACTLY what Kay did. She left Sullivan alone. They did their morning show each day and during those four hours they were the only two people in all the world. Together they were on a madcap romp—laughing, teasing, flirting, dueling and enjoying every precious minute of it. The Sullivan-and-Kay show got better each and every day.

How shocked the radio audience would have been if they could have seen the change that took place when ten o'clock came each morning. As one turns off a spurting faucet, Sullivan would turn off the charm, rise from his chair and, without so much as a "see you later," depart for his office.

Shortly before noon one Monday, Kay answered the phone to hear Janelle Davis's soft voice. "If you aren't too busy, Kay, could I come by your office and speak to you about your costume for the Columbus Day parade?"

"Of course, Janelle. In fact, I'm getting hungry. Why don't you and I grab a salad or a sandwich together?"

Half an hour later the two women sat at the Café Promenade in Larimer Square, the beautifully restored older part of downtown Denver.

Kay sipped her wine. "Sullivan tells me the theme of this year's parade is to be the old west."

"Yes, I think it will be great fun." Janelle smiled. "Sullivan's going to ride a beautiful black horse."

"Good Lord." Kay's eyes clouded. "I won't be expected to ride, will I? I'm scared to death of horses."

"Yes, I know. Sullivan said you'll ride on the Q102 float. He also mentioned what he'd like you to wear."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he'd like you to be the schoolmarm." Janelle patted her mouth with a linen napkin.

"No, Janelle. That would be as dull as dishwater." Kay smiled. "My crafty partner. He's to make a grand, dashing figure atop a coal-black stallion while little Miss Clark sits on a float dressed in a white blouse, long skirt and her hair in a bun."

"Perhaps you could dress up as Annie Oakley, then." Janelle looked at Kay expectantly.

"Was that Sullivan's idea, too?"

Janelle's face reddened. "Yes. He said you might not like the schoolmarm idea, so..."

"He's so right. Nor do I intend to be Annie Oakley. Order me a dance-hall dress. I'd like a flamboyant eye-catching satin outfit with mesh hose and a feathered hat and— What's wrong?"

Janelle, an expression of displeasure on her face, was shaking her head.

"Kay, you can't do that."

"Oh, yes, I can." Kay leaned forward. "Did Sullivan tell the rest of the air personalities what to wear?"

"That's different, Kay."

Kay frowned. "Why? Because I'm a woman? Because he's older and thinks I'm still a kid?" Kay was growing angry.

"That's unfair, Kay. Sullivan just—"

"Janelle, you're a very nice lady, but you're too damned protective of Sullivan!"

"Yes, I suppose I am," Janelle admitted sadly. "Just as Sullivan is overly protective of you."

"Janelle, I'm sorry. I know that—"

"Don't be. Sullivan has never thought of me as anything other than a friend. But I'll tell you something, Kay, hurt him and I'll snatch you bald-headed."

Kay smiled and touched Janelle's hand. "I like you, Janelle Davis."

"Same here." Janelle grinned.

"Order me that costume and don't tell Sullivan."

"I will—and I won't."

BRIGHT OCTOBER sunlight caused Kay to open her eyes and blink. She knew she'd overslept. Groaning, she tossed back the covers, took a quick shower and pulled on her jeans and a sweat-shirt.

The Columbus Day parade was to begin promptly at ten o'clock on the Saturday before the actual holiday. Kay, used to rising early every morning, hadn't set her alarm, certain she'd awake with time to spare.

Now, at five after nine, she was speeding toward the station in her red Porsche. She roared into the parking lot and up to her office where a note was taped to the door.

"Kay, your costume is in Sullivan's office. Janelle."

Kay turned and sped down the hall. The station was quiet. All the other participants were already at the pa-

rade site or across the street at Leo's. Kay threw open the door to Sullivan's office, saw a big box on the couch, and drew out a green satin dress, a matching garter, a pair of black mesh hose and very high heels. The green satin hat had a curling green feather.

Kay smiled and slammed the door closed. She soon stood frowning before the big mirror. Mesh hose and high heels on, satin hat pinned atop her upswept hair, Kay was frantically trying to hook up the back of the tight dress. Arms bent behind her, she fumbled with the stubborn hooks, her cheeks staining a bright red.

Her high breasts were practically spilling from the snug bodice. The full skirt reached her knees, but the hem was folded back over the dress at one point, showing off white, frilly ruffles as well as a stockinged leg. The green garter was visible upon her left thigh. Momentarily wishing she'd dressed as a schoolmarm, Kay gasped when the office door opened.

In the portal a tall, dark cowboy stood gaping at her. Booted feet apart, the intruder's black eyes flashed with menace. A tailored shirt of snowy white stretched across muscular shoulders; a star of shiny silver flashed upon his chest. Tight black trousers revealed the lean, hard muscles of his thighs. Around his narrow hips, a gun belt of smooth leather rode low, a silver pistol in the holster. Upon his head was a pearl-gray Stetson, and on his hands, gloves of black kid leather.

"Sullivan!" she gasped, clutching frantically at her open dress.

His dark eyes raking over her, he took a step inside, closing the door behind him. Kay met his furious gaze, although her stomach was doing a flip-flop and her hands were trembling.

She lifted her chin and said, "Sullivan, could you help me fasten my cos-

tume? I'm having a little trouble with the hooks." She smiled sweetly at him as though she'd not noticed his displeasure.

Sullivan couldn't keep from smiling back. Rigid body relaxing, he replied, "I'm not Sullivan. I'm the marshal, ma'am, and I ought to arrest you for going about half-naked."

Relief flooding her body, Kay laughed and took up the game. "Oh, marshal, please don't take me to jail. I'll be plenty decent once this dress is hooked up." She batted long eyelashes at him.

"I doubt that." He grinned, his eyes moving to the swell of her breasts. "But I'll do what I can." He pulled off his gloves and came to stand behind her. Nimble brown fingers went to the tiny hooks at her waist. "Move your hands, Kay, and I'll have this taken care of in a minute."

"I'm all yours," she said, smiling, and felt warm hands brushing the bare skin of her back as Sullivan tugged at the tiny hooks. A shiver went up her spine. She wondered if he felt it. All at once the big hands stilled, left the dress and gently cupped her bare shoulders. Turning his head, he lowered his lips to her nape, kissing her lightly. He looked at her in the mirror opposite and said softly, "What am I doing dressing you when all I've ever wanted to do is undress you?"

Kay opened her mouth, but no words would come. A little gasp escaped her lips and Sullivan pulled her gently back against his tall, hard body. He pressed his open lips to the sensitive cord going down her neck.

"Sul, oh, Sul," Kay whispered breathlessly, tilting her head to give him total access.

"Kay," he murmured hoarsely, while he nibbled tenderly. "Why do you have to be so sweet?" His tongue

teased at the tender spot beneath her ear. "Why must I feel I'll starve without the taste of you?"

Kay sighed and turned her face toward his. Sullivan's lips lifted and he looked into her shining blue eyes. He moaned and slowly lowered his mouth to her soft, parted lips. He kissed her with restrained passion, trying desperately to control the fire she'd kindled in him. But when their lips separated, his eyes dropped to catch the brief, fleeting glimpse of the rosy-hued crest of a creamy white breast.

It was his total undoing.

Sullivan groaned, pulled her back against him once again and let his hands slide up her rib cage to the top of the dress. With his lips in her hair and his deep, drugging voice whispering her name, he slowly peeled the green satin down to her waist. Kay didn't protest as, with a gentleness that left her breathless, those sure hands moved up her trembling body, tenderly cupping her bare breasts.

Unbelievable warmth and pleasure quickly flooded Kay's being. Her breasts swelled to fill his hands, and when his thumbs brushed at their aching peaks, she said his name softly. Her eyes remained closed, her face turning to press into the warmth of his throat. Open-mouthed, she kissed his smooth cheek, licking a line along his chiseled jaw.

"Kay." His voice was husky. "Kay, honey, open your eyes."

Face still turned, she let her eyes open and gasped when she cut them across the room toward the mirror. "Sul." She bit her lip and once again closed her eyes.

"No, sweet baby," he pleaded. "Open your eyes and look. Look at us, honey. Oh, you're so beautiful."

Face flushed, Kay opened her eyes again. In the mirror two eager lovers

were caught and framed. At Sullivan's soft urgings, she watched with unabashed pleasure as the hands of the only man she'd ever loved gently, expertly caressed her naked breasts, driving her slowly, happily insane. "Sullivan. We are... Oh, Sul, kiss me. Please."

Sullivan's hands reluctantly left her breasts; he turned her in his arms and pulled her up against his tall, hard body. His mouth lowered to hers and all restraint was gone. Hungrily, deeply he kissed her, holding her head in his spread fingers to press her closer. Sighing into his mouth, Kay pushed the Stetson from his head and ran an eager hand up into his thick, black hair, her senses reeling from the heated mouth devouring hers.

Kay was vaguely aware of something on Sullivan's broad chest pressing into her naked shoulder. It was mildly abrasive, and soon forgotten when his hot, wet tongue dipped deeper, finally drawing her own into his mouth.

Weak, dizzy, thrumming with desire, Kay clung to him, loving the feel of his mouth, his hands moving over her bare back and finally sliding to her satin-clad hips to press her ever closer to the pulsing, throbbing hardness straining against his tight black trousers.

His mouth went to her chin. "No woman in this world kisses me the way my sweet baby does," he said. "You know just what I like, don't you, honey?"

"I... Yes, yes, Sul," she murmured.

"I want to kiss you all over, Kay, all over... every sweet part of you."

Kay couldn't answer. Eyes closing in ecstasy, her hands were once again in his hair, unconsciously urging his mouth down toward the bare, swelling

reasts, aching for his touch. Her eyes fluttered open just as his mouth closed over a pale crest in a warm caress that made her shudder.

Lips upon the hard little peak, Sullivan murmured, "Sweet. Oh, so very sweet."

"Hey, Ward." Jeff Kerns's voice was followed by pounding on the door.

"Sullivan!" Kay gasped, horrified.

Sullivan, eyes still glazed with passion, stepped protectively in front of Kay, shielding her should Jeff open the door. "Be right with you, Jeffrey." His voice was just a bit shaky. "Stay where you are, we're on our way out." Broad chest rising and falling rapidly, Sullivan deftly hooked up Kay's dress.

"All done," he whispered and she turned to face him. Sullivan winced. There on her delicate white shoulder, red blotches from the punishing silver tar on his chest looked tender and raw. "Kay, I'm sorry," he said, and Kay knew he was apologizing for more than chapped flesh. Before she could respond, he retrieved his Stetson and hurried her to the door.

Jeff Kerns, dressed as a piano player in an old-time sporting house, stood with his arms folded. "I was beginning to..." His words trailed off as he looked from Sullivan to Kay and back again. Eyes twinkling, his lips began lifting into a pleased smile.

"Open your mouth and I'll shut it for you, Jeffrey." Sullivan glared down at him. Jeff remained silent, but he winked at Kay. She couldn't keep from smiling.

THE COLUMBUS DAY parade was a crowd-pleasing, spectacular success. Marching bands from across the state, equestrian units, huge flower-laden floats, precision drill teams and unicycle-riding clowns all drew applause.

The Q102 float was positioned near the very end of the procession. At a felt-topped table, deejays Dale Kitrell, Dallas Smith, Ace Black and one of the salespeople sat playing cards, stacks of colored chips in front of them. Sherry Jones, in a long blue brocade dress, a black feather boa around her neck, was the dealer.

At a polished mahogany bar, the plump bartender was Sam Shults, who smiled warmly at Kay as Jeff lifted her atop the bar. "By the way," Jeff whispered, "did Sullivan mention that he is supposed to ride by, rope you and—"

"No!" Kay hoped he was teasing.

"I'm getting worried about Ward. He's mighty forgetful lately." He tweaked his false mustache, adding, "If you see him ridng up, you're to raise your arms, okay?"

"But, Jeff—" She gritted her teeth.

"Not my idea." He shrugged merrily and took his seat at the old player piano.

Kay, her legs crossed, sat atop the bar and waved to the onlookers. They fully approved of her glittering green garb and many ran up to the slow-traveling float to get her autograph, to touch her hand, to say how much they enjoyed the morning show.

Gracious, she smiled and waved and posed prettily, all the while thinking of what had happened just prior to the parade. It was all she could do to keep from touching her lips, as though the imprint of Sullivan's masterful mouth would still be there. Invisible though it was, his brand was on her. It had been from the first time he'd ever kissed her.

There'd been men in her life in California. She'd shared kisses with a few that had made her heart speed pleasantly, but Sullivan Ward was the only man for her. There'd never been another lover. She'd been a virgin when

Sullivan had so tenderly taken her on that never-to-be-forgotten night. With his intimate possession of her willing, innocent body, he'd become the holder of her heart.

"Hey, Sullivan!" Someone shouting his name snapped Kay's head around. "Why isn't your partner riding with you?"

Kay's eyes went to the commanding figure astride a huge black horse, as Sullivan advanced on the float.

Hat tilted low over one eye, white teeth flashing, Sullivan easily reined the prancing black stallion, moving steadily closer. To the waving, admiring crowd, he shouted, "You know, I think my pretty partner should be with me at all times." His eyes gleamed and Kay colored, reading a personal meaning into his careless words.

Sullivan pulled the horse up, directing his attention, and that of the crowd, to a nervous, smiling Kay. When he tipped his hat to them and unhooked a coiled lariat, they went wild.

"Yup," he drawled dramatically, "I think that little filly belongs in the custody of the marshal, just for being so danged beautiful. Don't y'all?"

Loud applause and piercing whistles were his answer.

When a perfectly thrown rope fell over her head and tightened at her waist, Kay blinked and winced. Arms pinned to her sides, she felt helpless. Sullivan urged his horse closer, lithely stood in the saddle, and in one fluid movement, plucked Kay from the bar.

Someone softly screamed and Kay realized it must have been her as Sullivan pressed her back against his chest and said, "Don't be afraid, Kay. I'd never let you fall." And after deftly removing the rope, he held Kay as they rode the prancing horse down the street.

Kay forgot her fear of horses and waved gaily to the cheering crowd. How could she be frightened? The man she loved had her in his protective arms. Kay was sure that as soon as she and Sullivan could be alone...

Stomach fluttering, eyes sparkling, Kay mentally planned what she would wear on this evening of evenings. She had no doubt that Sullivan would want to take her out to dinner or come to her place for a meal.

She could wear the new blue loose-knit sweater and suede skirt if they had dinner at her place; if he wanted to go out, she'd wear the daring V-backed black silk. It was sexy and elegant and he was sure to like it.

The parade finished at the far end of Broadway. There, Janelle Davis, at the wheel of Sullivan's gray Mercedes, waited to drive Sullivan, Kay and Jeff back to the station.

Kay was stunned when Sullivan, after helping her down from the horse, passed the reins to a waiting stable boy and walked to the car. He climbed into the front passenger seat, leaving her standing.

A warm hand gripped her elbow and Jeff's familiar voice said, "I see ol' 'strong and silent' is cranky again." He laughed and walked her to the car.

Janelle, turning to speak to Kay and Jeff, gasped and asked bluntly, "Kay. Your shoulder! It's all pink and raw. What happened?"

Kay, her face turning just as pink, said evenly, "I suppose it's some sort of allergy."

Jeff hit Sullivan's shoulder and said wickedly, "Yeah, she's either allergic to horses or to Sullivan..."

A dark head swung around and Sullivan fixed Jeff with a hard stare. "Your stale humor may go over with your listeners, but I find it offensive. I

told you earlier, shut your damned mouth or I'll do it for you."

Unruffled, Jeff winked at Kay and laughed. Janelle, shaking her head, drove back to the station.

To Kay's shock, Sullivan slid under the wheel as soon as they all got out. "I'll see you guys later," he said, and drove away.

"There goes a real jerk," Jeff said.

By the time Kay had changed back into her jeans and was driving home, the bright sunshine had departed. A cold winter rain was beginning as she pulled into the underground garage.

All afternoon, Kay's unhappy eyes kept going to the silent telephone. Why didn't Sullivan call? Why didn't he come over? How could he be so passionate and loving one minute, so cold and uncaring the next?

It was dark when she went to her closet and pulled out a raincoat. The windshield wipers made an irritating sound as she drove across town.

Kay wheeled into the only space in front of the elegant Park Lane Towers, parked and jumped out of the car. Kay gave the uniformed doorman a charming smile and pointed upward, then shrugged as though she'd lost her key.

The man nodded and threw open the heavy glass door. Kay rushed inside, relieved. If she'd had to ring Sullivan's buzzer, she was not at all sure he'd have let her in.

Kay stood, wondering what had possessed her, on the nineteenth floor, just outside the door of Sullivan's penthouse. She knocked decisively.

"Yeah, it's open," came the irascible male voice.

Kay cringed and thought of fleeing. Cold hand on the shiny brass knob, she

pushed the door and stepped inside. Slowly she closed it behind her.

It was dark in the big room. Only one light burned and it was an elbow lamp on a glass-topped table. A half-full bottle of Scotch sat beneath it, a glass of the amber liquid beside the bottle. A dark hand slowly moved from the darkness to curl its fingers around the glass.

A faceless voice from the shadows said coldly, "Is there something you need?"

"Yes," Kay said resolutely, and shrugged out of her wet raincoat. She descended the three steps into the big pine-paneled room and walked toward the light.

Sullivan remained where he was, lounging in a leather easy chair. He wore no shoes, no shirt.

Kay stood above him, straining to see. "Can I offer you a drink? There's ice in the..."

"I don't want a drink, Sullivan." Kay warily took a seat on the big soft ottoman beside his bare foot. "And it's not like you to drink either."

"How the hell do you know what's like me?"

Kay looked into his angry dark eyes; then Sullivan leaned back into the darkness again. "You never used to drink, Sul."

"My name is Sullivan. Stop calling me Sul. I didn't used to do a lot of things, Kay. People change."

"Yes, they do. But, still, I—"

"This is the first time I've had more than one or two social drinks in over ten years, so if you're worried I've a drinking problem, kindly forget it."

"I wasn't. That's not why I—"

"Then what? Tell me, Kay. What are you doing here?"

Kay rose and swept around the big room turning on lamps. "I cannot talk to someone I can't see," she told a

blinking, frowning Sullivan. She came back to him, dropped on the footstool, and said, "We have to talk, Sullivan. About what happened today in your office."

"What happened today? Did something happen today?"

"Don't be flip with me, Sullivan Ward!" Kay leaned toward him. "You know very well what I'm talking about. You held me and you—"

Sullivan sighed. "I'm sorry. God, you'd think I'd get tired of saying that, wouldn't you?" He smiled and looked up at her. "I am sorry, Kay. I was out of line and I behaved like a teenager whose hormones were raging."

"That's all it was?"

"What else?"

With speed and grace that surprised her, he leaned up and placed both feet on the floor, trapping her inside his bent knees. "Listen to me, Kay, because I'm tired of repeating myself. I gave you your first break because you were talented. Then I fell— Then I foolishly began a relationship with you because you were so darned sweet and irresistible. It's always foolish to get involved with someone you work with—it's downright destructive when that person is a young, willful girl with burning ambition and the skill to realize her dreams."

"There was nothing wrong with our relationship, Sullivan. What we had was—"

"Special?" he interrupted icily. His lips curled cruelly, his eyes snapping. He tossed down a long swallow of Scotch and leaned back once more.

"It was special, Sullivan. It was. That last night was—"

"A mistake. A terrible blunder on my part, but as I said, I'm a little sick of saying I'm sorry. Take all the wrongs I've done to you and make a

list. Then I'll check it off with the appropriate number of I'm sorry's."

Kay shook her aching head. "I don't want apologies, I want—I want us to be like we were in your office this afternoon. I want you—"

"To take you to bed?" He leaned forward. "That it, Kay?"

"No, Sullivan, I don't want you to take me to bed," she said sadly, her bottom lip beginning to tremble. "I want you to make love to me. There's a difference, you know."

"Oh, really?" He lifted heavy brows. "Well, thanks, darling, for telling me. I had no idea. I thought sure..."

"Damn you, Sullivan Ward. Don't you patronize me! What happened between us five years ago was an act of love—I know it, you know it. I'll never believe otherwise."

"So how in hell could you get out of my bed and catch a plane to the coast?" He was back up now, his face close to hers. "Answer that one, little miss authority on human relations!" His eyes were filled with fury. "My God, I couldn't believe it. I made love to you half the night. I told you over and over how much I loved you and I'll be damned if you didn't leave me without so much as a parting kiss. Can you imagine how I felt when I woke to find you gone?" He shook his head as if to clear it.

Tears now streaming down her cheeks, Kay said softly, "Why didn't you tell me to stay? Why? I never would have—"

"Stop! Stop it," he said in a voice as cold as the rain streaking down the two-story glass behind them. "You're a great actress, Kay, but it won't work anymore, at least not with this boy. I've seen the movie, read the book, know all your moves, honey." Sullivan started smiling. "You know,

you're like everyone else, me included. You find it almost impossible to face the truth about yourself. Am I right?" Kay looked at him, tears falling freely. "You were ambitious and you got a great offer to go to L.A. Now, you'd have gone even if I'd begged you to stay, but since I didn't, it's a great little escape for you, isn't it? You can always piously tell yourself that everything is my fault. Big, bad ol' Sullivan took your virginity. Old loser Sullivan resented your success. Cold, uncaring Sullivan let you go away.

"Well, babe, just between you and me, let's face the facts here. You did exactly what you wanted to do. People usually do, though hardly any of us can ever face it. As for me, well you're right, I resented your success, was jealous of it. That suit you?"

"No, it doesn't," Kay said sadly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "Sullivan, I wish I'd never... I want..."

"Too late, darlin'." He shook his head. "Way too late for regrets. But cheer up, Kay. You are better than ever on the air. It's just a matter of a few months that you'll be stuck here." Sullivan rose and walked to the tall glass windows. Looking out at the rain-soaked city, he said, "It's already the middle of October. We go into the Arbitron audience-rating period the first of November. By no later than mid-January, the book will be out. If we get good numbers—and I'm sure we will—you'll get a New York offer in no time at all." He lifted his bare shoulders and said, "Then that'll be it. You'll be back on your way."

Kay rose, walked to him and lifted a hand to rest on the small of his back. He flinched. "Sullivan," she said softly, "I'm leaving now, but I'll tell you something. When I get into my bed tonight, I'll be remembering how

you held me and kissed me this morning." She paused and sighed. "And you know what, so will you." Kay let her hand fall away. Impulsively she leaned to him, kissed a bare shoulder blade, turned and hurried across the room to her coat.

Sullivan Ward never turned around.

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IT WAS A VERY businesslike Kay Clark who said hello to her co-host on Monday morning. It was a pleasant, cooperative Sullivan Ward who greeted her, as though the encounter of Saturday had never happened. "We've got ten minutes, Kay." He looked at his watch. "I forgot to mention to you last week, we've been invited to emcee a dance the Denver Asthma Society is holding at McNichols Arena. It's a fifties type sock hop." Sullivan made a face. "They want us to be king and queen of the hop." He lifted wide shoulders. "Can you make it? It's scheduled for this coming Friday night."

"Sure, I can make it." Kay smiled.

"Sounds like fun."

"Good." He nodded. "One more thing—on Halloween night the Thompson Orphans Home is having their annual party for the kids, and I thought, well..."

"Count on me," Kay said.

"Kay, it's not a personal appearance. What I mean is, we don't get paid for this one. The children's party would strictly be volunteer."

"I'll be there, Sullivan," she assured him. "And I'm happy to do it for free."

"Thanks, Kay." He got up and came around the desk. Together they headed for the control room. "Mile High magazine called last week. They want an interview at our convenience. I said I'd give them a call."

"Fine," Kay agreed, "any afternoon this week is good."

"I'll set it up," he said, while from the monitor came Dale Kitrell's voice. "So stay tuned for the upcoming Sullivan-and-Kay show and I'll be back with you tomorrow...."

THE NOVEMBER issue of *Mile High* hit the newsstands on the first day of the month, the very day the Arbitron rating period began at Q102 and at every other radio station in town. On the magazine's slick cover, a handsome couple smiled into the camera.

The caption read, "Denver's hottest duo." Inside, a well-written story about the pair spread over six pages with more photographs of Sullivan and Kay.

The Arbitron audience ratings were under way, and they outdid themselves to make their morning show entertaining. To further ensure success, they increased their personal appearances, sometimes doing as many as three a week.

Sam Shults was fully approving, urging the pair to get out and be seen at every opportunity. Kay was more than eager to make the appearances. Not only was it beneficial for the station, it constantly threw her and Sullivan together. She kept hoping that in time, if she were very, very patient, he'd come around. She had decided that she'd never again push him or plead with him. He was a proud and stubborn man and she knew that he alone would be the aggressor should he change his mind. There was little she could do but try to show him, by her actions, that she could be trusted. She could do nothing but wait.

As though he could sense the change in Kay, Sullivan seemed to relax. There were no more kisses, no tortured

glances, no evidence of strain and stress. Kay wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but she reasoned that if they were ever to recover the closeness that had once been theirs, they'd first need to become friends.

RATING PERIOD ended on December fifteenth, and at 10:00 a.m., Sullivan Ward turned off his mike, rose from his chair and let out a loud shout of relief. Kay stuck out her hand and said merrily, "Shake, partner. We did it!"

"We sure did, baby," Sullivan said, and ignoring her hand, wrapped his long arms around her and crushed her to his tall frame. He rocked her back and forth in uninhibited glee and Kay thought she would surely die of happiness. Instinctively, she molded her small body to his, and tentatively lifting her hands, she put them to Sullivan's trim waist. The rocking ceased. The laughter died. Sullivan, as though coming to his senses, eased her away from him.

"Okay, you guys—" Jeff stuck his head in the door "—it's time to celebrate. Be at Leo's in fifteen minutes for champagne brunch." He was gone before they replied.

"Hungry?" Sullivan smiled down at her.

"Famished," she replied.

"Shall we?" He took her hand in his.

"You bet."

TWO DAYS prior to Christmas, Kay was to fly to Phoenix, Arizona, to meet her parents at her uncle's home in Scottsdale. Before she left, she knocked on Sullivan's closed door and went inside. She carried a slim box wrapped in silver paper.

Sullivan rose and said, "So you're off to the airport?"

"My plane leaves in an hour," she confirmed. "I just wanted to give you your present before I go."

"Kay," he said, "you shouldn't have. I didn't want you to—"

She thrust the package at him. "I wanted to."

Sullivan patiently worked the ribbon and paper away. "Just what I needed." He smiled warmly at her, looking at the gold pen inside.

"Wait, Kay." He laid the pen aside, and took a small box from his desk drawer. Shyly he handed it to her.

"Thank you," Kay managed and started backing away.

"Why don't you open it?"

"Sure," she said. Inside, she found a soft red-leather case containing a tiny camera no larger than a cigarette lighter. It was of shiny yellow gold.

"It actually works," Sullivan announced. "And you'll be needing it."

"Why?"

Sullivan grinned. "Because we're escorting a planeload of people to Paradise Island in the Bahamas in mid-January." He loved the surprise on her face.

"Sullivan, you mean it?"

"I'll tell you all about it when you get back." He guided her to the door.

"Have a Merry Christmas, Kay."

"You, too, Sullivan," she said, and felt his warm lips brush her cheek. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Oh, you, too!"

IT WAS WARM in Phoenix. Kay was happy to see her parents, who'd flown up from Florida. Uncle Will had decorated his palatial hillside home with every kind of ornament and Aunt Sybil had obviously been cooking for weeks.

Kay received loads of lovely gifts from her family. So all were puzzled

when, the very day after Christmas, she rose early, ate a large breakfast and announced she was going to spend the day shopping.

Kay borrowed one of her uncle's cars and headed for the exclusive Scottsdale shops with a mysterious smile on her face.

The one thing on her mind was the Bahamas with Sullivan Ward. Kay had the glorious premonition that it would be there, in that island paradise, that the man she loved to distraction would at long last surrender.

Kay went from boutique to boutique searching for clothes to take on her trip. By the time the desert sun was slipping below Camelback Mountain, the borrowed Buick's roomy trunk and back seat were filled with her purchases.

ON JANUARY twentieth, Sullivan and Kay were in high spirits upon landing at Miami International. From there, motor coaches took the group to the pier where a sleek cruise ship stood gleaming white in the warm Florida sun.

Kay, her face awash with pleasure, clung to Sullivan's hand and hurried up onto the sun deck, saying happily, "Help me find my stateroom?"

Sullivan chuckled. "Gladly. It's next door to mine." He led her down two levels to the promenade deck, where the prized outside staterooms were located. Kay's eyes swept over the red and white interior with its window offering a view of the sea. Then she poked her head into the bathroom.

"Sullivan! There's even a tub." Before he could answer, she was pulling the card from a bon-voyage basket of fruit. "How sweet," she said. "It's from the entire staff of Q102." She lowered the card and saw them. A

dozen Happiness roses in a crystal vase on the night table. Kay looked nervously at Sullivan, afraid to assume anything. The mysterious depths of his eyes gave nothing away.

Kay read the card as she inhaled the roses' fragrance. When she turned Sullivan was smiling at her. "Thank you," she said softly, and put a hand to his strong jaw. She stood on tiptoe and gave his smooth cheek a kiss. He seemed neither pleased nor perplexed.

"Meet you topside in fifteen minutes," he said.

Kay stripped off her sweater the minute he closed the door. She liked the look that came into his eyes when she joined him at the ship's railing—and even better the feel of his arm coming around her waist to draw her closer. They stood high above the pier, waving to the crowd below, and Kay threw back her head and laughed as the ship maneuvered out of the bay toward the open Atlantic.

"You should try to cheer up, Kay," Sullivan kidded, and laughed with her. Kay was sure it was going to be a glorious trip.

MOONLIGHT shimmered on the ocean as Sullivan and Kay languidly strolled the promenade deck, smiling and nodding to members of their group reclining in deck chairs or taking the sea breeze after dinner.

In the distance, a million twinkling lights were growing closer. Soon the port of Nassau came up to meet them.

Everyone went ashore, and Kay, riding across the island, peered out at the lush green-black foliage. Over the bridge, the rattling taxi sped to Paradise Island, where the group's hotel rooms awaited them.

Sullivan bade her good-night and Kay, briefly studying the lovely room

of green and white, crossed to the white-slatted double doors and flung them open. Bright moonlight streamed into the room with the sound of the breakers crashing against the beach.

Kay's last thought before she slept was, "It is Tuesday night. We leave the island on Monday morning. I have five days and nights to make Sullivan see that we are made for each other." She was smiling as she fell asleep.

It was a wonderful but busy time for Kay and the Denver crowd. Her role as hostess meant escorting some of the travelers across the island bridge for shopping and browsing. The fashionable shops of Bay Street were a delight, and only a couple of blocks away, the world's largest straw market was a favorite of the Denverites.

But the days and nights flew past much too fast. Kay was having a glorious time, and Sullivan, she had to admit, spent as much time as he could with her. It was hardly his fault that every day's agenda was crammed with obligations for both of them.

Except Sunday, which was to be an entirely free day.

Saturday night rolled around and Kay, her slim body browned by the hot Bahamian sun, dressed for the dinner dance she and Sullivan were to host. From the closet she took a new, slinky white crepe dress, slipped it over her head and hooked the halter-type top in back of her neck. The dress, completely backless, zipped from midhip to waist. Her hips gently flared and the long dress fell to the floor in soft swaying folds. Braless breasts pushed provocatively against the lush fabric covering them. Kay opened a vial of expensive perfume she'd purchased at one of the duty-free shops, tipped it up to a forefinger and dabbed between her breasts. A dab inside each elbow, and then she grabbed a brush and gave her

hair one last vigorous stroking. "Sullivan," she said into the mirror, "it's now or never!"

A string orchestra was tuning up in the still-empty ballroom.

"Am I late?" came the velvet voice from behind her.

Kay turned. Sullivan, elegant in a tuxedo as black as his hair, was smiling at her. Lean fingers worried his black bow tie. The stiff French cuffs of his white shirt were set off with onyx links.

"No, I'm early." Kay brushed his hand aside, reaching up to straighten the tie.

"Thanks," Sullivan said, glancing at his gold watch. "You're right, it's just now 8:30 p.m."

Sullivan and Kay dined at the head table with eight travelers who considered themselves extremely lucky to be their companions. Before the last of the diners had finished dessert, couples drifted to the dance floor. Kay, eagerly anticipating Sullivan's arms, shot daggers at the brazen redhead who came to tap him on the shoulder and said, "Sullivan, I'm just dying to dance with you. My girlfriend—" she nodded at a smiling brunette two tables away "—bet me I didn't have the nerve to ask you." She smiled prettily.

Relieved when the song ended, Kay bit the inside of her lip in frustration when she saw the pair walking over to the brunette. Sullivan was speaking, and the woman got up, tugged on his arm and dragged him onto the floor.

So went the evening. It wasn't Sullivan's fault. Kay knew that. She was also pursued and spun around the polished floor by more than one boisterous male intent on having a grand time. Sullivan gave Kay knowing looks when their eyes met.

It was nearing midnight before Kay, feet beginning to swell in her high-

heeled sandals, smiled gratefully and stepped into the commanding arms of Sullivan Ward.

"Tell you what," he whispered. "When this song ends, make your way toward the door. I'll follow in exactly five minutes. They'll never know we're gone."

"I'll be in the casino by the first row of slot machines," she murmured, and felt all the listlessness leave her body.

Neither spoke for the remainder of the dance. The orchestra was playing an old romantic ballad and a smooth-voiced Bahamian was singing. The roomful of people faded away and there were only the two of them, moving as one, swaying around the floor. Sullivan held her very close. She was tingling from his nearness, the tips of his fingers like fire upon her cool skin.

Kay would have sworn that his smooth, warm lips were scattering tiny little kisses on the wispy hair beside her temples. A slow, spreading coil of desire began to build in her lower stomach, and Kay closed her eyes, wondering if it were possible to die from wanting someone too much.

In a daze, she sidled out of the ballroom, down the carpeted corridor and into the lively casino. Soon, Sullivan guided her to a pair of French doors at the side. Down marbled steps and into a tropical garden they strolled, the full moon lighting the lush grounds.

Finally he spoke. "Let's walk on the beach."

"I'd love to," Kay said, "but I'll get sand in my shoes."

"Take 'em off."

"It's not just the shoes, Sullivan. What about my stockings?"

"So take them off, too."

"Turn around," she said, handing him her shoes. Kay, nervously casting worried eyes all around her, slid the silky panty hose down over her hips

and legs. Now she wore nothing but the white crepe dress, and the ocean breeze gently molded it to her slender body.

Sullivan took the hose and stuffed them in his suit pocket.

They walked for a long way down the deserted beach, talking little, drinking in the beauty around them, enjoying each other's company and the unspoken closeness between them. Kay felt her heart lurch with happiness when finally Sullivan said, "It's time to go in."

"Yes," she said breathlessly, the soft, filmy dress caressing her naked body, arousing her, teasing at flesh that craved the tall, dark man beside her.

They were at the door of her hotel room. Kay fumbled with the key, then turned and looked expectantly up at Sullivan, dropping it back into her evening bag. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the warm palm.

"Kay." His voice was husky.

"Yes?" Hers was breathless.

"Good night," he said. And handing her the silver shoes, he turned and walked away.

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STUNNED AND unbelieving, Kay stood motionless, feeling her stomach knot painfully. Hand cold and stiff, she slowly closed the door, dropped the shoes and valiantly fought back the sob welling up in her throat. She crossed the room to open the slatted double doors that led onto the private balcony overlooking the white sand beach and the restless sea beyond. Kay stood alone in the moonlight, her slender body trembling with need. Tears of hurt and pain stung at the backs of her eyes.

Then she whirled and went back inside, stripping the soft dress from her

heated body. She turned on no lamps. It was the darkness that she sought. Tears now sliding down her cheeks, she stood in the shadows. Finally, she walked into the adjoining bath, and hastily shoving her hair up under a shower cap, Kay stepped into the shower, jerked the curtains closed and twirled the cold-water faucet full open. Cold, pelting water hissed upon bare, heated flesh.

It did little good.

When Kay stepped out ten minutes later, her body temperature may have been a little lower, but the clawing need deep in her stomach remained. She was patting at her wet body when she heard the soft knock on her door. She grabbed for her robe.

"I'm coming," she said, heart pounding in her chest, and rushed to the door. Running nervous fingers through the tangled mane of her hair, she lowered her hands, jerked frantically at the sash of her robe, took a shallow breath and said, "Who is it?"

"Sullivan," was the firm, one-word response.

Stifling a gasp, Kay opened the door.

He stood there, hands clasping either side of the door frame. The elegantly tailored tuxedo was gone. The white shirt was unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up. His feet were bare.

Kay said nothing. One hand finally went to his pocket and brought out a pair of panty hose. He held them out to her.

"Oh," Kay said. "Thank you. I... I forgot."

For an interminable time, Sullivan stood there, saying nothing, his burning eyes devouring her.

"Kay," he finally managed.

He moved into the room and closed the door. "Kay, I... I hurt. I hurt so bad, baby. Help me. Hold me."

A flood of love and happiness washed over her as she murmured softly, "Oh, my darling," and stepped into his embrace.

"Love me, honey. Please, love me. Kay," he gasped thickly against her sweet-smelling damp hair.

"Dear God," Kay marveled aloud. "You care. Sul, you still care."

"I said I'd care forever—" he slid a lean hand up to cradle her head "—and I meant forever, Kay." His eyes were filled with love and desire. "Kiss me, Kay. Kiss away all my pain. Love me."

His mouth slowly descended to hers and soon he was nipping at the soft flesh inside her bottom lip, teeth raking playfully, before he sucked the lip into his mouth for an instant. He released it, kissed the left corner of her open lips and said, "Kay, sweet, I want to kiss you all night long. I want to make up for all the years I starved for the taste of you."

His mouth moved back to hers, his tongue sweeping across her small, even teeth, then sliding into the darkness behind them. Kay clung to his neck and let the warmth in her body and his rise unchecked.

When at last his mouth reluctantly separated from hers, Sullivan lowered his burning lips to the gentle curve of her neck and shoulder, kissing the warm, clean flesh.

Nibbling there, he murmured huskily, "Oh, Kay, my only love, I want to kiss you all night and all over." Gently he bit her neck. "I want to kiss your nipples and your navel and your knees." He lifted his head. "And I want you to kiss me, too, baby. I want your gleaming little mouth to claim mine, to drive me wild as only you know how. Will you do that for me?"

Kay said breathlessly, "Lower your head and I'll show you," as she stood

on tiptoe and began slowly, teasingly kissing his full mouth. Her lips played with his, nibbling, licking, withdrawing, finally twisting provocatively. Kay ran the tip of her tongue along the inside of his upper lip and Sullivan sighed into her mouth and pressed her closer.

She made him wait no longer. Kay brazenly darted her tongue deep into his mouth. She felt him shudder against her and felt powerful and happy and grateful all at the same time. She explored and savored just as he had done and they continued to stand there kissing in the moonlight, their breath growing labored and loud, their bodies growing hotter and hungrier. Sullivan placed her hand inside his open shirt, directly over his hammering heart. The feel of his warm, hair-covered flesh added new fire to Kay's burning body and she wrenched her mouth from his and began to shove the white, rumpled shirt down from his wide shoulders, over his long arms and off.

Inflamed by the sight and scent of him, Kay, her blue eyes glazing, began to press heated lips to the broad, dark chest, murmuring, "I want to kiss you all over, too, Sul. All over, all over."

"Yes, my darling," he was saying as his hands worked at the sash of her robe. So caught up was Kay with the hard male chest she was caressing, she hardly knew when the robe slipped away.

Suddenly she became very aware of her nudity. Sullivan's warm, sure hands were pressing her close, his fingertips gliding down her naked spine to the small of her back. Kay's lips lifted from his chest and she looked up at him.

"I love you, Kay Clark," he said and pulled her closer. Thick, curly hair tickled the full, swelling breasts he'd

exposed. The contact was warm and wonderful. Kay's already tingling, tautened nipples responded instantly as Sullivan kissed her again.

Kay stood naked against the man she loved and kissed him and kissed him and was never quite certain how they arrived at the bed. She knew only that her head now rested on the soft, fat pillows in the darkness and that the sheets were cool and clean beneath her bare, hot body.

Sullivan stretched out beside her, his handsome face barely visible in the darkness. A long, heavy leg was resting over her own; she could feel the smooth, slick fabric of his pants and wondered fleetingly why he still had them on.

"Kay," he was saying, a hand raking through her hair, "there's not been one week, one day, one hour that I did not miss you."

"It's been the same for me, Sul. I swear it."

"Say it then, Kay. Say you love me." A lean hand moved down to caress a swelling, ripe breast.

"Sul, I love you. I have always loved you and always will. I belong to you, now and forever."

The hand at her breast tightened upon tender flesh. A finger circled the tight little crest and Kay sighed with pleasure. "Oh, honey," he whispered in the darkness, "I love you, too. So much. So much I..." His hand released the breast and moved down to her narrow waist as his mouth again took hers in a deep, drugging kiss.

While the fingers of one hand tangled in her long hair, holding her mouth to his, the other hand continued to glide tenderly down her body, slipping around a bare hip, fingers spreading upon the soft rounded cheek of her bare bottom. He shifted, pressing her closer to him, letting her feel

the throbbing heat behind his zipper, while his tongue went deep into her mouth and his chest pressed heavily upon her breasts.

For a long while they stayed in that position, taunting each other, pleasuring each other, savoring every magical, mystical step on the erotic road to fulfillment. Into each other's mouths they murmured love words.

Sullivan lifted his head. His eyes flashed at Kay and he pulled from her embrace. Kay watched, enraptured as he rose from the bed. She heard the zipper slide down, squinted to see as he took off his dark tuxedo pants and tossed them over a chair.

The moonlight that slashed into the room covered only the lower half of the bed. Sullivan was undressing by the head of the bed. "Kay." His velvety voice was very deep and loving.

"Yes?" She squinted back in his direction.

Sullivan's arm came out of the darkness. He reached for and found her hand. Gently he pulled her up to kneel on the bed. Kay, her entire body now awash in the moonlight, breathed shallowly, sat back on her heels and saw Sullivan step out of the darkness and into the light.

Above her head he was saying softly, "Kay, I'm going to turn you so that we will be lying with our heads at the foot of the bed."

Kay, slowly tearing her curious, wide eyes away from the throbbing rod of heat that so fascinated her, tipped her head back to look questioningly up into his dark, smoldering eyes. Sullivan could read her puzzlement.

"Because, darling," he said softly, "if we lie with our heads on the pillows, I won't be able to see you." His head slowly bent to her and Kay moaned when a warm, soothing mouth closed over her aching right nipple.

When he lifted his head, his hand took the place of his mouth. "Kay, when I make love to you, I want you to be looking into my eyes." He smiled at her. "I want to see the pain and the pleasure and the love in your eyes when you feel me enter you." Sullivan brushed his lips to her open mouth and gently maneuvered her down once more onto the bed, on her back, her face awash in the light of the moon, long silvery hair spread out around her fragile face.

"Oh, you're a beauty," he said, his dark eyes watching with pleasure the quivering belly his hands were now awakening. "You know," he said, "you're all tanned except for a white strip across your lovely breasts and your lower hips and thighs. It seems hardly fair that the most beautiful parts of your body are denied the caress of the sun." With that, he bent to kiss each pearly white breast in turn while his hand possessively closed over the silvery triangle of curls between her legs. He gently urged her satiny thighs apart and Kay moaned softly and tossed her head to one side, whispering his name.

Silky female flesh, wet from wanting, was his to claim, to caress, to make his own. Sullivan agilely shifted, moving his long, lean body between her parted legs. He was over her now, looking down at her. His mouth dipped to hers for a kiss of unrestrained passion and into her mouth he said, "I love you, Kay—never stopped, couldn't. Make me whole again, baby."

"I will, my love," she said with assurance, putting her small hands to his wide shoulders and looking directly up into his dark eyes while he lifted her hips to him and slid into her with a deep, sure thrust of his powerful male body.

It hurt very much like it did that first time, but Kay, her eyes wide open, looking into Sullivan's, bit the inside of her lip and felt the pain turning to pleasure, while above her, his breath warm upon her face, Sullivan murmured soothingly, "My love. I'm sorry, I'll stop, I'll wait."

"No," she sighed, her tight little body gripping him, sheathing him, loving him. "I want it. I want you to love me."

Sullivan sprinkled kisses over her cheeks and shoulders and breasts and felt her soft body slowly begin to relax and mold itself to his. His passions flaring white-hot, Sullivan began to rotate his hips, driving deeper and deeper into the warm, moist sweetness holding him so tightly. His hands were clutching her hips. He was lifting her to him as their rhythm increased and they moved gloriously together, ascending to a height of rapture both had long since forgotten could exist on earth.

But they were no longer on the earth.

They were one, joined in body and spirit, soaring high, finally exploding together, shooting heavenly sparks of light and love all around them. At the very pinnacle of pleasure, Kay's eyes widened with wonder, then slowly, languidly closed. They fluttered nervously open once again until she heard her gallant lover saying, "My darling, close your eyes if you wish. I love you, Kay, I love you."

Kay smiled lazily, let her eyes close and sighed with peace when she felt Sullivan's smooth lips tenderly kissing her closed eyelids. She lay completely limp and satiated while his mouth moved worshipfully over her face, her hair, her throat, and he remained still buried inside her; she was reluctant ever to have his flesh parted from hers.

His lips brushing a now-soft rosy nipple, Sullivan sighed and moved to her side, drawing her to him.

"In all of my dreams," he whispered, "in all the times I've lain in my bed and envisioned you in my arms again, never could I have hoped it would be this glorious, this complete."

Kay smiled. "I know," she said. "Sullivan, I want to tell you something."

Sullivan kissed the fingers playing along his bottom lip. "What, sweet?"

"You know, darling, that first time. I was a virgin, remember?"

"Sweetheart, do you think I could ever forget?"

"Well, what I wanted to say is... I...Sul, since that night...that was the only time."

Sullivan raised up on an elbow. "My sweet Kay," he said, "that's why it hurt you again. Oh, honey, I hurt you. I knew it was hurting you and it's because—" The words choked off in his throat. "Kay," he said, stroking a lock of hair back from her cheek, "it was a wonderful gift you gave me all those years ago. It was the same gift you gave me tonight. You are a treasure and you make me so happy, Kay." He then confessed, "Listen to me. I've been to bed with other women, had sex, but I swear to you, I've not made love since that night you left me." He saw no look of censure in her eyes and he smiled, recalling the time she informed him of the difference. "There's a big difference, you know." He smiled.

Kay grinned. "Yes, I know."

Sullivan, relieved, lay back down and Kay, turning over onto her stomach, cradled a cheek in one hand; the other went to the thick, dark hair on his chest. Her fingertips played there, enjoying the feel of it.

"Sul, can we talk now?"

Sullivan yawned contentedly, folded his hands beneath his head. "Yes, now we can, Kay."

"Those first few months after I left I wrote to you all the time," Kay reminded him.

"Yes, and your letters were full of all the exciting things going on at your L.A. station and of your success. I came to L.A. once," he admitted almost shyly.

"Sullivan?" Kay raised up on an elbow. "When? Did you try to see me, call me?"

"I did see you." He sighed. "Honey, I meant to call you and take you out to dinner. Then I lost my nerve, but they were having a big parade and I'd heard your radio station had a float."

"That's how you knew—" Kay's blue eyes widened.

Sullivan nodded. "There you were, showing off all your best assets to a panting crowd, while I stood, my blood boiling." His smile faded. "God, I wanted to jerk you off that float, cover you with my shirt and drag you home."

"Darling," Kay said softly, "why didn't you?"

"Kay, sweetheart, I've a feeling you would have kicked my shins and told me to mind my own damn business, and you'd have been correct. You've as much right to choose which road to travel as—"

"I chose the wrong one, darling. I've wasted years I could have been in your arms, so let's waste no more." Kay leaned down, gave his mouth a soft, sweet kiss and murmured, "Teach me, Sul. Show me how to be your lover."

"I'd say you're a natural, honey, but I wonder if you're still the adventurous kind."

"I love adventure, you know that."

"Good. We're in the islands and we should take advantage of it, do you agree?"

"Yes. But then it appears to me we are taking advantage of it." She dipped back to his mouth, to tease, to taste, to delight him.

"Hmm, yes, we are," he mumbled, "but I thought tomorrow, since we have the entire day free, we could get up early, catch a plane to Eleuthera and..."

SULLIVAN AND Kay were hardly airborne the next morning before they were once again descending. The little commuter plane glided to a stop at Governor's Harbour Airport, and a taxi took them up a very narrow road to the ferry dock. Hopping onto the ferry, they were taken to the Dunsmore town dock. From there, they walked to a quaint hotel where Sullivan let go of Kay's hand and strode directly to the desk. Kay wondered idly if he intended for them to check in and spend the day in their room.

Soon he was smiling broadly. "We're being ferried to a tiny, uninhabited island for a very private afternoon."

"You're teasing me." She arched her eyebrows.

"I'm not," he assured her. "The hotel dining room is going to pack us lunch."

"Sounds wonderful," she said, thinking this was going to be one lovely Sunday.

And it was.

Less than an hour later, they stepped onto the hot, white sands of a minuscule island that belonged only to them for the day. The smiling little man who'd transported them waved a cheerful goodbye, promising to return

at 8:00 p.m. In seconds he was only a speck on the emerald waters.

Sullivan stashed the hamper under dense, shading foliage, then said, "Shall we take a swim?"

Together they played in the water, shouting, laughing, splashing, until they were tired. Sullivan swung Kay up into his arms and carried her onto the beach, dumping her onto a big blanket near the water's edge.

They lay on their backs in the sun, lazy, happy and soon hungry. Kay eagerly looked inside the hamper. "Sullivan," she said, "they've thought of everything. There's cold roast beef, ham, cheese, bread, wine and fruit."

They dozed for a time after lunch. Kay stirred first, rolling easily to a sitting position. Beside her, Sullivan slept peacefully.

She sighed with supreme happiness, then rose and walked across the hot sands to the cool water. She walked out until the emerald waves were slapping at her breasts, kicked off from the bottom and began to swim gracefully out. She swam alone for a time, then suddenly gasped. Something was tugging on a toe. Kicking furiously Kay identified the pesky creature, laughing and giving a broad brown back a stomp of her bare foot.

Sullivan surfaced in front of her. "How long have you been out here?" A long arm circled her waist.

"Not long. You were sleeping so deeply." She put her hands atop his shoulders.

"Hmm, well I'm wide awake now and ready for action." His eyes gleamed.

"Mister," she said cheerfully, "I'm afraid you've come to the wrong island for action."

"No," he countered, "the kind of action I'm seeking can only be found here." His hands were sliding up her

rib cage to her breasts. Kay felt a shiver of excitement. His hand went behind her, deftly unhooked the skimpy bikini top and pulled it away from her body while his eyes looked into hers. "Isn't that more comfortable?"

"Yes," she admitted, the white mounds of her naked breasts clearly visible in the crystal water.

"Then why not take off the rest?"

"Sul, do you really think... I mean, what if..."

But Sullivan's hands were already sliding down over her hips. Thumbs hooking into her briefs, he said, "I want us to swim together naked. Don't you want that, too, Kay?"

Kay could only nod as she saw Sullivan's hand go high over his head to toss both pieces of her garb onto the beach.

Then he rid himself of his swim trunks, tossed them, after Kay's suit and pulled her back into his arms, two eager bodies pressing naked together as Sullivan drew Kay's slender legs around his waist and kissed her long and lovingly.

"That's all you get for now," he teased her. "Don't want you getting spoiled."

Kay playfully nipped at a gleaming wet shoulder, pushed him away and swam out toward the green and blue of the horizon, fleetingly deciding that swimsuits should be outlawed.

Sullivan swam out to her. They raced, they floated, they had a water fight. They walked naked out of the surf and stretched out on their rumpled blanket to rest, lying on their backs, eyes closed against the direct rays of the sun. The water rapidly dried on their bare bodies.

She was almost dozing when he said very softly, "Kay, I love you."

Kay's eyes slid open just as his mouth came down on hers, warm and

gentle. Then it went to her soft shoulders. Sullivan's long, bare body nestled closer to hers and Kay felt her passions rising rapidly. The movements of his mouth upon her skin made her squirm and sigh and murmur his name. Soon, his tongue was gently pressing into the hollow of her throat, then continuing to kiss a wet, warm path to a quivering, anxious breast.

"Sweet," he murmured, and took a nipple into his mouth. Gently he sucked, leisurely loving her, until Kay's eyes were opening and closing with ecstasy and her hands were twisting in his thick, damp hair. Sullivan groaned as he sucked at the hard little peaks until Kay thought she could stand the sweet agony no longer.

His mouth slid lower still, kissing a path down her middle, pausing at her flat, sun-warmed stomach. His mouth slid lower and he kissed her. Kay's shocked eyes flew open when his tongue began to stroke silky, sensitive flesh. She began to squirm, trying to pull free, but Sullivan's hands clung to her hips to hold her to him and his masterful mouth soon had Kay writhing in sweet, undreamed-of torture.

She no longer tried to pull free. Nearer and nearer to the brink Sullivan took her, pulling back just before total fulfillment, pressing soothing, soft caresses to her shimmering thighs until Kay, calming a little, would gasp as that heated mouth again closed over the silken fire to lick and love and drive her higher and higher. When at last total joy burst within her, Kay screamed out in ecstasy and frantically bucked and writhed against him.

Sullivan stayed with her, his hands grasping the naked smooth flesh of her bottom, holding her to him, letting the jerking of her little body subside and

finally pass. Only then did his mouth leave her.

She lay limp and listless upon the sand, at peace with the world. Too happy to speak, Kay let Sullivan gently enfold her spent body, pressing it tenderly to his, his lips upon her hair, her face resting on his chest. Beneath her ear, his heartbeat, strong and rapid, told her he was still in an extremely excited state, as did the swollen, heated maleness jerking against her thigh.

Sullivan, the blood pounding in his ears, gratefully eased her onto her back, moved over her, murmured, "I wish I could wait for a while, but I..." A look of torture flashed in his dark eyes as he entered her, moaning with pleasure.

Slowly he moved within her and to Kay's surprise, she soon began to come alive again, to enjoy, to feel her body heating, to crave and anticipate an encore of release. Sullivan sensed it, slowed his movements, eager to take her with him to total bliss. Exquisitely he loved her.

Kay was soon moving erotically with him, whispering his name, feeling that sweet knot of fire building, until the inferno had to be quenched. The explosion came for them both and they moaned and sighed, tossed and buffeted by a force greater than they had ever known.

Slowly the waves of rapture subsided. They lay there on the sand, two sated, happy lovers, naked in paradise, free of clothing or guilt or cares.

Sullivan finally spoke. "How do you like your adventure?"

Kay's answer was a smile, a soft kiss and a hug so tight Sullivan could feel it gripping his happy heart.

ON TUESDAY morning, Sullivan and Kay were back on their early-morning radio show. Working together had always been fun. Now there was an added dimension to their relationship and the dim control room fairly crackled with electricity. Love had conquered and its warm glow made the cold winter day appear brighter, the music better, their well-timed patter more humorous than ever.

A lengthy record played on the turntable. Kay asked, "When do you look for the rating book?" Kay was looking into his eyes and saw a puzzling flicker there which immediately vanished. Sullivan smiled.

"Be any day now, Kay."

"You're not worried about it, are you?"

"Darling." Sullivan laughed easily and leaned closer. "You're imagining things. Now give me a hug before this song ends."

Relaxing completely, Kay smiled and pressed her cheek to his, supremely happy. She never saw the look of doubt filling the eyes of the man she loved.

Sullivan clasped her to him and silently battled the small tight core of fear expanding in his abdomen. He was sure they'd get a good book. Positive. And the entire broadcasting industry would know of their success.

Would he lose her again?

Sullivan closed his eyes and tightened his embrace.

THAT VERY morning, during the nine o'clock newsbreak, an excited Jeff Kerns hurried into the control room. Sam Shults was right behind him, grinning from ear to ear, the Arbitron rating book clutched in his hand.

Sam lifted it high. "It's here, kids.

Just came in."

Kay swallowed and grabbed Sullivan's hand. Evenly, he said, "Out with it, Sammy. Are we the hottest team in radio or not?"

"Sullivan, Kay—" Sam Shults, looking from one to the other, proudly confirmed "—it's even better than we'd hoped for! I mean your show pulled a whopping sixteen share... more than our wildest expectations. Congratulations to you both. You two are an unequaled hit. No one else came close."

*

THE WEEK following the arrival of the fantastic rating book was one of sweet, undiluted pleasure for everyone's favorite radio team. Kay and Sullivan were together every moment, day and night, happily learning all the little idiosyncrasies of each other's complex personalities.

Sullivan found there were many things he'd never known about the charmer now sharing his apartment. She said nothing for at least forty-five minutes after awakening each morning. He found this strange, since the moment he opened his eyes, he was ready to discuss the day's plans. It took only a couple of mornings for him to learn that Kay liked being kissed awake, but conversation was taboo.

Sullivan also learned that he'd never fully realized just how lonely his life had been without this woman whose tinkling laughter was music to his ears. She came to his arms whenever he held them out to her, which was often. She was his sweet, adorable Kay; his to touch and teach and treasure.

That's how it would always be.

SULLIVAN AND KAY were well aware that the success of their morning show made their services infinitely more

valuable. They'd discussed at length the amount of increase they planned to request at contract time.

Sam Shults had already hinted at a figure he had in mind. Sullivan had smiled easily, knowing Sam would offer far less than the amount authorized. Bargaining was all a part of the game. Sullivan Ward was good at it.

Sullivan and Kay, their airtime finished for the day, were seated in his corner office, discussing their salary increases. Kay, in her hand an envelope of photographs she'd taken on their Bahamas trip, was nodding her agreement.

"Oh, Sul—" she looked up, interrupting him "—you've got to see this one." She handed the picture across his desk. "You look like a movie star." She smiled at him.

Sullivan glanced at the picture, handed it back and said, "Show me the ones I took of you."

Kay complied and watched as his dark eyes lit up. He held one picture between thumb and forefinger, smiling broadly. The photo showed only Kay's face and bare shoulders.

He grinned at her. "I want this one for my wallet."

Kay shook her head. "If you ever..."

"...tell anyone that you were naked when I snapped this?" His hooded eyes mocked her. "I won't, sweetheart, but I know that makes the picture precious to me."

The buzzing of the intercom interrupted them. Sullivan punched the button. "What?"

Sherry Jones's excited voice filled his ear. "Sullivan, is Kay in there with you?"

"Yes, she is."

"Oh, good. Tell her that she has a very important telephone call on line three from ABC in New York City."

"I suppose you heard that, Kay. You've a call on line three," Sullivan said.

"Hand me the phone, will you?"

"You might want to take it in your office, Kay."

Kay rose from the chair, smiling. "Why on earth would I want to do that? I've no secrets from you." She lifted the phone and said, "This is Kay Clark."

Sullivan, lounging back in his chair, hands behind his head, watched Kay. He saw her eyes widen and sparkle with excitement, and his stomach tightened. "Yes, yes. I... Well, thank you." She listened for several minutes, then was again speaking.

Sullivan never changed his lazy position. He looked for all the world like a man totally at ease, so that his reaction was a great shock to Kay. When she'd ended her telephone conversation, she told him that it had been the program director from ABC in New York City. They had seen the ratings and wondered if she'd be at all interested in flying up to discuss the possibility of becoming the first air partner of their dynamic morning-show star.

Sullivan's hands slowly came from behind his head. His jaw clenched and his eyes were cold and hard when he said, "So when do you leave?"

Kay laughed. "Leave? Sul, I didn't say—"

Rage, unchecked, showed on his face and his voice took on a deadly imbue. "Your eyes said it for you." He rose, shoved his hands into his pockets and walked to the window.

Kay felt terror rise to her throat. Those eyes looked so menacing. She knew she must at once clear up any misunderstanding on his part or she was in danger of losing him again. Kay hurried to him, put a hand on his

shoulder and said softly, "Listen, I don't—"

Sullivan spun around to face her. "Listen? I did, Kay. I heard every word and I don't remember a single no coming from those lovely little lips."

Kay's apprehension grew. "Sullivan, you didn't hear me say yes, either. My Lord, give me a little credit."

"Credit?" he parroted. "Oh, sweetheart, you get all the credit. You're the smoothest little number on the airwaves." His black eyes snapped with fury. "New York City!" He shook his dark head. "Just what you wanted. Kay, I understand; really I do. Who wouldn't be thrilled to get an offer from one of the top radio stations in the country?"

Heart thumping against her ribs, Kay felt dizzy, ill. "Sul." She sighed. "Don't— Oh, dear God, Sullivan, tell me to stay. Say you can't let me go."

For what seemed an eternity, his eyes impaled her and Kay held her breath, praying to hear the words she wanted to hear.

Finally Sullivan sighed. "Kay, I am not going to tell you to stay."

Kay released her breath. Pride, hurt and her own stubborn will mixed to make her say resolutely, "Very well, Sullivan, don't." She tried bravely to smile though her bottom lip trembled. "I can't make you, but I'll tell you one thing." She gulped for a breath. "This time it really is your fault. If your arrogance and pride are so great that you can't bring yourself to ask me to stay here with you, then we both lose, darling, because I will leave. I'll go to New York City and I'll do the best job I possibly can and in time I'll forget about you." Kay paused, reached out, put a hand to Sullivan's downcast face, making him look at her once again. "It is my second choice, Sullivan. Do you hear me? Don't ever forget that."

Kay looked up at him, studying the depths of his dark eyes. She saw there an unmistakable sorrow. It touched her, but not enough to keep her from turning, stepping past him and walking determinedly to his office door.

The door closed behind her and Sullivan stood rigid where she'd left him. He couldn't believe it had happened again.

THE WINTER SUN was setting and Kay, alone in her apartment, thought idly how soon something becomes a habit. It was strange to be alone in this place she'd thought of as home until a week ago. Since she and Sullivan had returned from that glorious holiday, she'd spent every night with him in his penthouse apartment across town. In exactly one week's time it had become very natural to take all her showers in his brown-tiled bath, to eat her meals from his chrome-and-glass table, to sleep like an infant in his big bed, a pair of strong, protective arms holding her close through the cold winter nights.

Throughout the long, lonely evening, Kay couldn't keep from hoping that the phone would ring, that it would be Sullivan saying he was sorry, that he wanted to come over. She was still hoping for a phone call when she crawled tiredly into her bed at midnight.

It was cold in her bed. So cold. Kay assumed the fetal position and longed for the arms that had held her only the night before.

SULLIVAN WAS coolly congenial when Kay walked into the control room the next morning. Treating each other like polite strangers, they said little until he swung their mikes into position and the morning show was under way. The

show, like always, was professional and polished. They laughed and chatted, easily convincing their listening audience that they were in high spirits and having loads of fun.

At ten o'clock, Sullivan flipped off the mikes and rose. He exited the control room without a word to Kay.

Kay remained for a moment in her chair. When she stood up, she'd made up her mind. She went directly to her office and called New York. That done, she rose, took a deep breath and walked down the long corridor to Sullivan's office.

She knocked on his door and stepped inside as soon as he called out. "Sullivan," she said immediately, "I need a couple of days off." Kay met his gaze. "For personal reasons, I need to miss work on Monday and Tuesday mornings." She stood looking at him, hands clasped in front of her.

"Sure, Kay." He surprised her. "I see no problem."

"Sullivan, the reason I want—"

"You needn't explain," he said. "You haven't missed a day. You're entitled." His eyes lowered to the papers on his desk.

"Thank you," Kay said. She added, "Ah, Sullivan, I was wondering if I could come by your place this evening and—pick up my things."

"By all means," he answered without raising his head.

JANELLE DAVIS rubbed her temples. She pulled out her middle desk drawer, looking for an aspirin. The constant noise from the next office was beginning to wear on her nerves.

It was Wednesday afternoon. Sullivan had been furiously chinning himself on the high steel rod off and on since shortly after ten o'clock. This was the third consecutive day of hear-

ing him heave and blow and raise himself repeatedly up to the bar.

Janelle knew what was bothering him. Rumors were rampant throughout the Denver radio community. Sherry had wasted little time in spreading the word that ABC in New York had called Kay Clark with a job offer. Janelle shook a couple of aspirins into her upturned palm, shook her head and wished it were Kay Clark that was shaking.

A great crashing noise from next door preceded the sound of Sullivan's office shower being turned on full blast. There'd be at least one more shower after this one if he went home at his usual hour of six.

THE WEEK dragged for Kay. Yet it flew past much too fast. All week she'd clung to a thread of hope that Sullivan would turn to her and say, "Don't go, honey. Please stay with me." Or that he'd come to her apartment. Or that he'd phone and say that he wanted her back at his place where she belonged.

As the days passed and her trip to New York approached, Kay began to face the facts. He was not going to stop her. He was going to let her fly up to New York, be interviewed by ABC and accept, should they offer her a job. She'd painted herself right into a corner and there was no way she could get out.

It was Friday. The day she was to leave. The morning show went smoothly. Ten o'clock came quickly and swallowing her pride, Kay looked up at the dear, handsome face and murmured ever so softly, "I'm going tonight, Sul, but until that plane takes off—" The rest was left unsaid. Tears were threatening to spill and she could no longer trust her voice. Sullivan's

eyes were as hard and cold as polished onyx. His tall, lean body was tense.

Kay knew it was hopeless.

"Good luck, Kay," he said, turned away and hurried out.

Her heart breaking, Kay left the station.

Sullivan went directly to his office, closed the door and walked to the chinning bar. Shortly after three in the afternoon, Janelle Davis knocked on his door.

Not waiting for an answer, she stepped inside, closed the door and leaned back, arms folded. Sullivan, shirtless, perspiration glistening on his shoulders, lowered himself to the floor.

"She leaves on United's 7:00 p.m. flight for New York." Janelle looked straight into his eyes. Sullivan said nothing. "I checked," Janelle continued, "there are seats available." She smiled at the silent Sullivan, turned and left without another word.

KAY, looking cool and sophisticated in a well-tailored suit of cream wool, brown silk blouse with its mandarin collar fitted tightly around her long, elegant neck, silver hair plaited into a thick coil and pinned atop her head, stepped into the first-class cabin of the New York-bound jetliner.

Smiling absently at the stewardess, Kay located seat 3A, glancing around at the few passengers already seated. A middle-aged couple sat in the front two seats; behind them, two tired-looking businessmen, one already dozing, held briefcases on their laps.

In the third row, a pair of long legs in gray flannel slacks was crossed beneath a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, which covered the face of its reader.

Kay took her window seat, buckled the belt tightly and fought the foolish

fear already clawing at her stomach. Heartache was temporarily forgotten as passengers boarded, the front hatch was locked, and Kay felt the movement of the big plane.

Eyes wide with fright, she looked out the tiny window, her small body tensed. Just as the heavy plane began to speed ever faster down the runway, Kay's head snapped around.

A lean brown hand gently covered a white-knuckled one and Sullivan Ward buckled his seat belt with his other hand. Kay blinked at him in confusion that changed immediately to relief.

"I seem to recall you being a little nervous on the takeoff." His deep, soothing voice had never sounded more wonderful to Kay. Sullivan brought her cold, stiff hand up to the warmth of his sweated chest. Both his hands closed over hers and when she swallowed and tried to speak, he leaned close and said, "Darling, wait until we're up, then we'll say it all." Dark eyes caressed her and he added, "You're safe, sweetheart. I'm here with you. Everything will be fine."

Kay smiled. She made no move to look out her window at the lights of Denver that the captain spoke of. She looked instead into the shining dark eyes of the man clinging to her hands.

"The captain has turned off the seat-belt signs," the voice over the intercom said. "You may now move around the cabin, but for your safety..."

Sullivan squeezed Kay's hand and said, "I suppose you'd like to know what I'm doing here."

"Yes, but whatever your reason, I'm glad you're here."

"You're sweet, and that will make it easier to say what I have on my mind." Sullivan nodded yes when the stewardess asked if they'd like a drink. "Champagne," he ordered for them

both. Then he turned back to Kay. "Promise me that when you've heard me out, you'll give me an honest answer."

"I will," she told him and meant it.

"Kay, I love you. I want you to stay with me, but only if you're sure you'd never regret it."

"Sul, the only thing I'd ever regret is losing you again. Don't you know that?"

"Then why are you bound for New York?"

"Because," she admitted, "I suppose I'm almost as stubborn as you."

"Kay, you're very sweet, but are you certain you don't really want the job in New York? I love you enough that I want you to have—"

Kay interrupted. "Sul, you must believe me. I want nothing but to be your partner on the air in Denver."

"You don't think a year from now you'll wish you'd—"

"Never."

A broad grin lifted the corners of Sullivan's lips. "In that case, I've a suite reserved at the Hotel Pierre on the park. What would you say to a honeymoon in the Big Apple?"

Kay stared at him, speechless. Sullivan laughed and teased, "Does that mean yes or no, sweetheart?"

"Sul," she whispered breathlessly, "are you serious?"

"Kay, after this miserable week I knew I couldn't live without you—don't want to, refuse. That decided, I knew I'd have to swallow my pride and come after you. Here I am, darling. I want to marry you in New York and honeymoon with you at the Pierre. I told Sam we needed a week off. He agreed. Now it's up to you."

"The answer is yes!"

Sullivan laughed. "You don't want to think about it for a day or two?"

"Sul, you've told me what you want. Know what I want? I want to marry you just as soon as possible. I want us to spend an entire week inside that suite at the Pierre. I want to be on the morning show at Q102 with you for the next twenty years. I want to have our babies and—"

"Sweetheart—" Sullivan leaned closer "—would you be terribly embarrassed if I kissed you right now?"

Kay's answer was to turn parted lips up to his. Sullivan, his dark eyes filled with love, lowered his mouth to within one inch of hers and murmured, "Kiss me like there's no one else here."

"Is there?" she breathed and felt the sculpted male lips gently fit over hers.

Forgetting entirely where they were, Sullivan kissed her with rapidly increasing intensity and Kay clung to him and returned his ardor. The deep, drugging kiss was interrupted by the stewardess, clearing her throat just above them.

Sullivan reluctantly lifted his head. "You see—" he grinned and accepted their champagne from the attendant "—this woman has just agreed to become my bride and I felt that warranted a little kiss."

"I wholeheartedly agree." The attendant nodded. "And may I offer congratulations." She flashed Kay a smile and made her way on down the aisle.

"Sul?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you any idea how much I love you?"

"If it's half as much as I love you, I'm satisfied."

KAY'S SLEEPY EYES slitted open. Disoriented, she looked out the tall window across from where she lay. Cold rain streaked down the panes. Kay slowly turned her head.

A handsome face was smiling warmly just above hers. Dark, sultry eyes were looking down at her. Sullivan pushed a shock of tangled hair back off her cheek and said in a low, warm voice, "My sweet beautiful wife."

Kay smiled at him and murmured, "Good morning, husband," and lifted her head for his kiss.

Sullivan and Kay Ward, the hottest morning radio team of Denver, enjoyed total anonymity in New York City. They could have gone wherever they chose and no one would have recognized or bothered them.

However, they took no chances. While cold winter rains drenched the huge, teeming city, the newlyweds stayed safely ensconced in their suite. Room service provided all meals.

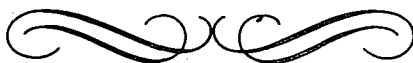
Kay, who'd never before been to the city, smiled and stretched lazily in their big rumpled bed and had not the slightest curiosity about the sights spreading out below their top-floor suite. All she wanted was in this room with her.

Kay clasped her husband to her, bit his ear playfully and said, "You know something, Sul?"

"What?"

"Someday we'll have to come back to New York and look around."

"Yeah," he agreed, kissing her throat, "we'll have to do that."





MARY LYNN BAXTER

Shared Moments



He was the devil in disguise, but he drove
her to the heights of passion even as she
fought him.

Courtney took one look at Kace McCord and knew that he spelled trouble.

She had seen other men with dark blue eyes and silver-gray hair who were just as handsome. But it was the way he looked at her.

As he uncurled his gangly frame from behind the desk, his interested gaze missed nothing of her one hundred fifteen-pound frame, scrutinizing her long legs, lingering upon her breasts, taking in the mass of blue-black hair.

He grinned warmly, and his bold stare unnerved her. For a moment she didn't know whether to remain in the doorway of his office and try to get the contract or leave and run out into the streets of New Orleans.

"You can come in, Miss Roberts. I won't bite."

"Are you sure, Mr. McCord?" she questioned.

"Yes, I'm sure," he teased. "I only bite young women with brown eyes. I can't tell whether yours are more gray or more green."

Through clenched teeth she said, "Mr. McCord, it doesn't matter. I'm here to talk business."

Unruffled, he grinned. "All right, you win. We'll talk business if you'll have a seat."

As Courtney took the chair adjacent to his desk, Amy's words of caution bounced through her mind: "Remember to tread lightly. You're destined to meet your match in Kace McCord." She had scoffed at her trusted assistant and friend, Amy Neal.

Courtney felt she could handle any man. Now, as she sat before him, she was less confident, although his contract could mean the future success of her business.

Sensing her agitation, Kace became serious—all business. He reached for the folder marked "Paper-Work-Plus" and began thumbing through it.

Not raising his head, he remarked politely, "I'm sorry, Miss Roberts, I haven't had a chance to check your company or your qualifications. If you'll bear with me a moment, I'll take a quick look."

Courtney swallowed her irritation. "By all means, take your time." Amy had sent him a copy of their requirements a week ago, and he hadn't even bothered to check them. She had felt certain the job would be hers. Now a knot of uncertainty was forming in her stomach.

While he studied her file, she studied the owner of McCord Builders, Inc. She judged him to be in his early to mid-forties. His khaki shirt and pants molded the wide expanse of his shoulders and the lean but muscled trimness of his hips to perfection. His dark tan told her he spent a great deal of time outdoors.

Turning toward her once again, Kace said, "Miss Roberts, do you realize this is a big job that will demand long hours and hard, accurate work on your part?"

Courtney didn't hesitate. "I assure you my assistant and I will be able to handle any type of word processing, no matter how difficult or detailed."

Kace's gaze raked her face warmly. "Well, there's no doubt," he drawled, "that I'm impressed with your credentials." He shut her folder and laid it aside, then stood up and walked toward the coffee bar in the corner of his office. "How do you like your coffee, Miss Roberts?" he asked.

Courtney moved impatiently. "I don't care for any, thank you."

He grinned, his eyes narrowing in laughter as he raised his cup to her in a mock salute.

Courtney felt more than a little disconcerted as his melting gaze lingered first on her slightly parted lips and then on the gentle rise and fall of her breasts.

"Will you have dinner with me this evening?" he asked abruptly.

Courtney stared at him. "I—I don't understand. You—you can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am," Kace regarded her intently. "I never issue idle invitations."

"What about the contract, Mr. McCord?"

"All in good time, Miss Roberts. All in good time."

Courtney chewed her lower lip. What now? she thought, and cautioned herself not to let him back her into a corner—contract or no contract. *If you give this man an inch, he'll take a mile!*

"Oh, come on, Miss Roberts, it can't be as bad as all that." He paused, grinning. "If I promise not to bite, will you come?"

Courtney failed to see any humor in the situation. "Very well," she sighed in defeat. "However," she went on firmly, "I expect this to be a business dinner only."

Kace chuckled. "Anything you say. Will seven be all right?"

Courtney nodded. "I'll be ready, Mr. McCord." She was striving painfully to keep things on an even keel as she made her way toward the door.

"By the way, my name's Kace—Courtney."

AS SHE DROVE home from work that afternoon, Courtney wondered again if the contract with McCord was really worth it.

With the sense of unease remaining with her, she entered her condominium and went immediately to her kitchen. The yellow and blue combination, enhanced by a skylight, conveyed the overall cheerfulness of her new home. The two bedrooms and two baths, plus the large den with the adjacent breakfast room were Courtney's pride and joy.

A small inheritance left to her by her mother three years ago had enabled Courtney to buy the condominium. The remaining money she had used to open her business. Together, these were the most important things in her life. Her only living relatives were two aunts and an uncle in Texas, whom she rarely visited.

Since the night Hal had so painfully severed her trust in men, she had built a wall around her heart. Only one day before they were to be married, he had eloped with her roommate. Although Courtney had dated a number of handsome men since, none had come close to breaking down that wall of reserve, until Kace McCord. And what made the situation more mind-boggling was that he was at least fifteen years older than she.

Stop it! she told herself sharply. Stop thinking about him. You're overreacting. After all, he's just a man. You can handle him.

She decided to wear a burgundy-colored dress of soft wool, styled for a blouson effect. Courtney acknowledged without conceit that its color complemented her dark hair and fair creamy skin. She was spraying herself with her favorite perfume when the doorbell rang.

She opened the door to a smiling Kace McCord. Courtney caught her breath as she took in his ruddy good looks. He was impeccably dressed in a tailored dark blue suit and crisp white shirt. His blue eyes seemed to devour her.

Courtney's stomach lurched dizzily as she murmured, "Hello. Please come in."

Kace stepped into the softly lighted den and looked about him with interest. "You've got a nice place here. I like it." His gaze rested on her face, warm and tender.

"I'm—I'm glad," she stammered. Courtney was appalled at her actions. Why, she wondered, did she react so strongly to this man? It was going to be a long evening.

They drove south toward the French Quarter. Courtney was lost in her own thoughts as she took in Christmas decorations that still lined the streets. Many people left their decorations up until New Year's, which was still three days away.

"I hope Brennan's is all right with you," Kace remarked. "I don't think you can beat their stuffed flounder anywhere in New Orleans."

Courtney forced a smile. "It doesn't matter to me where we go, as long as we can discuss business there." She had to put the evening back into perspective.

"Oh, I think we can manage, don't you?" he drawled.

Brennan's was one of the city's finest restaurants and a real favorite of

Courtney's, although she didn't dine here often. They were escorted to the softly lit bar while a table was being prepared. There was a heavy silence between them as they sipped their before-dinner drinks.

It wasn't until they were comfortably seated at their table that Kace turned the conversation toward business.

"I want you to meet with my lawyer around noon tomorrow. Is that agreeable?"

Courtney could barely contain her excitement. "Are you telling me I'm going to get the contract?"

"Were you ever really in doubt, Courtney?" He smiled.

"Of course I was," she answered.

"Well, you shouldn't have been," he admonished.

She inclined her head. "I appreciate your confidence. I plan to work days, evenings and nights if I have to."

He frowned. "I'm sorry, but I can't allow that. From now on, your evenings and nights belong exclusively to me."

Courtney sat frozen to the chair. For a moment, speech escaped her. Was he the crazy one? Or was she, for sitting here listening? Absurd! That's what it was. Anger surged through her.

"Surely you're not surprised, honey?" he stated huskily. "You *know* something happened between us when we met. Don't try to deny it, either."

Courtney tossed her head back defiantly. "Oh, yes, I will!" she said tersely. "I wanted your business, but that's all, Mr. McCord. Believe it or not, I'm perfectly satisfied with my life. I don't need a man to complicate things." Courtney shook her head as if to clear it. She couldn't believe this was happening to her.

Silence descended over the table as the waiter approached. With ease,

Kace ordered the house specialty for both of them. It didn't make any difference to Courtney. The thought of food turned her stomach.

After the waiter disappeared, she kept her eyes glued to the candle in the middle of the table. But when she did look up, her eyes locked with Kace's. She suddenly felt as if she were drowning.

He was watching her with a gentle scrutiny. "I'd like to get my hands on the guy who's responsible for putting that look of fear in your eyes," he said.

Courtney felt her face drain of every ounce of color at his personal remark. She pressed her lips firmly together, saying nothing. The silence stretched.

"Relax," he murmured. "I'm not about to hurt a hair on your beautiful head. I just want you to know where I stand, that's all." His voice was low-pitched, caressing.

"Please..." she began, only to have words fail her. Courtney's hands were twined around her glass. She couldn't allow him to see how badly they were shaking.

To her surprise, he reached over and uncurled her right hand. He carried it to his lips, turning it over and kissing her palm with warm insistence before releasing it.

Courtney's insides melted. Was there to be no end to this torment? Here she sat like a statue, mesmerized by this man's touch, his eyes, his silver hair. Where was her fighting spirit? Shouldn't she be up and gone, flagging down a taxi to take her home?

"Ah, here comes our food," Kace noted, his voice relaxed. His eyes, as they swung around to face her, were once again tender. He watched her closely as the waiter served them and then retreated.

After heartily consuming his food, Kace leaned back and watched Court-

ney pick at hers. "The quicker you eat, the sooner we can get out of here," he told her pointedly.

She managed to take a few bites of the rich flounder, only to lay her fork down quickly as the sudden lurch of her stomach warned her: no more.

Shortly thereafter, Courtney found herself being escorted out of the restaurant and into the refreshing night air. She breathed deeply, trying to clear her senses.

"There's no escape, you know," Kace remarked softly, matching her hasty stride.

Courtney expelled a sigh of relief as she soon found herself in his silver Mercedes, headed toward home. They were parked in her driveway before she realized it. In a fluid motion, Kace leaned across and pulled her gently against his muscled chest. The musky odor of his cologne made her senses spin. Her heart began thudding erratically as their eyes met and held. He slowly lifted the mass of silky hair and began nibbling and kissing the side of her neck.

"Please," Courtney whispered. "You promised you wouldn't..."

"I lied," Kace murmured warmly.

"Ohh, you...you," Courtney spluttered. She then tried to push him away, but it was too late. She could smell his warm breath as his lips slowly claimed hers in a yearning, hungry kiss whose forceful intensity seemed to draw her very soul from her.

When he finally withdrew his lips, she felt his gaze linger, drinking in the sweetness of her face. Courtney sat there motionless for a long paralyzed moment. She was shaken to the depths of her being. What now? She asked herself. He was probably thinking he had her exactly where he wanted her. Well, she would just have to prove him wrong.

Kace's voice broke into her troubled thoughts. "This is just the beginning of what I have planned for you—for us." He paused, with a sigh. "Since my wife died, I've never found anyone I cared to see more than once or twice." His voice deepened with desire. "You're so young, so fresh, so beautiful..."

"Please don't say things like that to me," she told him urgently. "You don't have the right."

His laugh was low and intimate. "We'll see. But right now I'd better go and let you get some sleep." He paused, significantly. "We," he stressed, "have a lot to take care of tomorrow."

*

IF IT HADN'T been for the sunlight filtering through the miniblinds, Courtney surmised she would have slept the entire morning away. Noticing that it was nine-thirty, she made a conscious effort to get out of bed.

Before she could make good her intentions, however, the phone began ringing. For a fraction of a second, her heart took a dive, then settled back to normal when she realized it was probably Amy.

On about the fifth ring, she answered. "Hello."

"Good morning, sleepyhead," the velvet-edged voice caressed warmly.

Courtney gripped the receiver so tightly she cut off the circulation in her hand.

"Were you asleep?" he asked huskily.

She refused to be drawn into small talk. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"Calm down, honey," he advised. "Didn't I warn you last night of my intentions?"

"Please..."

Kace broke in abruptly. "I'll pick you up at your office at one-thirty. We'll have lunch with my lawyer and discuss business. Bye for now, honey."

Courtney sat holding the receiver for a long moment, then, sighing, she replaced it and padded into the bathroom. A quick shower revived her fogged senses. An hour later she opened the door of her office.

"Where have you been?" Amy demanded. "I was just getting ready to call you."

"I didn't hear my alarm," Courtney admitted. She refrained from mentioning the phone call.

"Have a late night?" Amy questioned casually. She eyed her friend intently.

Courtney poured herself some coffee. "I wasn't out all that late, actually. But it was early this morning before I finally slept."

"Well, did we or didn't we?"

Courtney blinked. "The contract?" Her mouth curved downward. "It's ours if we want it. But," she went on, "I'm going to turn it down."

Amy looked horrified. "What!" she exclaimed. "Have you lost your mind?"

Courtney held up her hand. "I know how we've been counting on it financially, but working for or with Kace McCord is impossible."

"What do you mean? Did he try to proposition you?"

Courtney flushed. "Not exactly, but he won't take 'no' for an answer." She shook her head. "He's the most determined man I've ever met."

Amy grinned. "I'll take my hat off to any man who can break through that wall you've built around yourself."

"I hate to disappoint you," Courtney said, "but I'm not about to let

myself develop an interest in a known ladies' man like Kace McCord!"

Amy shrugged. "It's up to you, of course, whether you want to date him, but I hate to see you let this good opportunity slip through your fingers."

"Oh, Amy," Courtney wailed, "you just don't understand." Her voice broke.

Amy looked at her sympathetically. "I understand more than you give me credit for. You're attracted to him, and you despise yourself for it. Right?"

Courtney nodded, her voice too full to speak.

"If I promised to handle all the communication with McCord, would you reconsider?"

Courtney heaved a sigh. "I don't know...."

"It'll work, I know it will," Amy replied. "Once we get the initial agreement settled, the work itself will be a piece of cake."

Courtney's mouth curved wryly. "You're probably right, but there's already a complication. He's determined to pick me up here to go to a business lunch with his lawyer."

"Do you think he'd object if I went instead of you?" Amy inquired.

Courtney's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Oh, he'll object, all right. But I think he's too much of a gentleman to say so."

"So, does that mean you're willing to try it?"

"Only if you are." But already Courtney's features were less drawn.

"Sure, why not." Amy shrugged. "I'll do anything to get that contract." She grinned. "Well, almost anything."

COURTNEY planned to leave the office no later than one o'clock. That way she would be gone at least thirty minutes

before Kace was due to arrive. After hurriedly repairing her makeup, she wished Amy good luck and stepped out into the cloudy winter day. She took a deep breath, taking in the sights and sounds of the French Quarter. Buttoning her camel-colored blazer to break the chill of the wind, she didn't see the silver Mercedes parked by the curb. Just as she was about to pass by it, the door swung open.

"Going somewhere, honey?" Kace drawled.

Courtney halted in her tracks. The honey-toned voice caused her stomach to turn upside down. Quickly raising her head, she feasted her eyes on Kace's beautiful and powerful body as he slowly climbed out of the car. He was dressed in a pair of navy corduroy pants and light blue sweater—the exact color of his eyes, she noted.

When their eyes met, they locked in open warfare.

Kace was the first to speak. "You didn't really think you'd get away with running out on me, now did you?" Although his tone was velvet smooth, his eyes showed little signs of softening as he said brusquely, "Please, get in."

Stiff-lipped, Courtney whipped around and lowered herself into the car's plush interior. It was either acquiesce or create a scene. Within seconds, they were battling the lunchtime traffic.

Frustration engulfed her as she stared straight ahead. Why couldn't he take the hint and leave her alone?

"How long are you going to pout?" Kace prodded.

Courtney felt herself bristle for a moment and then, realizing how she must appear to him, expelled her pent-up breath slowly. She was twenty-nine and acting like twenty-one. Where was her self-discipline? Her sense of hu-

mor? There was only one way to get the better of this man, and that was to beat him at his own game.

So, in her most businesslike tone, Courtney said, "Please, Kace, I'd like to go back to the office." She sighed. "I hadn't planned to keep our appointment." She paused. "Amy, my assistant, was supposed to go in my place."

"I see," he commented lightly.

Courtney hesitated. "To be honest, I want the contract, but I don't want to have to see you on a daily basis to get it."

He said nothing, but his features told the story. They were withdrawn and unyielding as he busied himself parking the car.

Well, Courtney told herself, I've done it now. I've finally made him mad.

Shoving the car into park, Kace turned to face her, his eyes unreadable. "I realize I ought to be upset with you for your childish stunt." He ignored Courtney's gasp. "But I know you haven't as yet come to terms with what's between us, so I'm going to overlook it."

A cold shudder zipped through Courtney. "Now you listen to me, Kace McCord! I—"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that you also talk too much?" he interrupted. His words served to camouflage his actions. Before Courtney knew what was happening, she was locked in his arms. Kace's head swooped down, and his lips fastened on hers and clung. Taking advantage of her parted lips, his tongue slowly, reverently began to explore the inner sweetness of her mouth.

Courtney moaned as a burning sensation flickered through her body. This feeling sent a sudden shaft of alarm coursing through her, and she imme-

diately tried to put space between them.

"Kace, don't..." she pleaded against his lips, renewing her efforts to break away from him.

His soft teasing voice cut into her scuttling thoughts. "I have to admit this isn't my idea of the perfect place to make love to you." He paused, holding her gaze. "I only hope I'm not destined to carry out my whole plan of seduction in the front seat of a car." Laughter glimmered in his eyes. "Now what I really have in mind is a king-size bed, no clothes, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony. And..."

Courtney raised her hands to cover her ears. "Stop!" she demanded. "Don't say another word!" His words caused a tingling feeling to zigzag up and down her spine. She couldn't bear to think about the images they conjured up.

Tension coiled tightly within her, Courtney found herself being escorted into an informal but quaint soup and sandwich shop. At a quiet table in the rear, a young man with hair the shade of copper arose. He smiled, extending his hand.

"Hello," he said, smiling broadly. "I'm Mark Davidson. You're Courtney, I take it."

"Right," she agreed.

"Well, we're glad to have you aboard. Aren't we, Kace?"

"You betcha," Kace returned roundly.

Courtney acknowledged their compliment with a smile.

For the next two hours, Courtney found herself deeply involved in the details of the work Kace wanted her firm to handle. She wouldn't be human if she didn't feel excitement at the challenge. And the money! The amount was staggering! There was no way she could pass it up. But, she

promised herself, Amy must work with Kace. Mark she could handle. But Kace, no way. With this meeting, their volatile relationship would end:

Halfway back to her office, Courtney turned toward him. "You can wipe that smug look off your face," she remarked briskly. "Just because..."

Kace threw back his head and laughed. "Have I told you, Courtney Roberts, that you're becoming the delight of my life? And that I can't wait to teach you how to laugh and to love?"

A half smile curved her lips, but she replied somewhat sarcastically, "No, as a matter of fact, you haven't used that line before."

"Ah, ah," he exclaimed, eyes twinkling, "I must be slipping. I could have sworn I'd said that to you."

Courtney's pulse raced at these intimate word games. If she continued to play with fire, she told herself, she would deserve to get burned.

"Snap out of it, honey." Kace's voice ended her introspection. "You didn't hear one word I said to you, did you?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, I'll repeat it. I said I'll be out of town for a couple of days. But I'll be back in time to take you to the Sugar Bowl game and out to dinner."

Swallowing her irritation, Courtney said, "I'm sorry, but I already have plans for New Year's Day."

"Break them," Kace ordered mildly.

Courtney's eyes widened. "I most certainly will not!"

"Break them," he repeated. His eyes probed hers, and she could feel herself getting hot all over. "If I take it slow and easy, will you let me take you out and show you a good time?" He sighed deeply. "I promise I won't do anything you don't want me to."

"I don't..."

"Tell you what," he cut in briskly, "I'll call you the minute I get back into town, and we'll finalize the plans then."

THE LIGHTS of the Superdome shone bright and clear, enhancing Courtney's sense of excitement and anticipation. She hated to admit it, but she was actually enjoying herself tonight.

She turned toward Kace and smiled. Catching her movement, he gave her a quick wink, causing her heart to do a somersault. Sparks flared between them, and neither did anything to break the mood.

"I'm glad we got here in time to see a little of the pre-game show," Kace murmured close to her ear, and led her into box seats close to the twenty-yard line.

"Would you believe that I don't even know who's playing?" Courtney smiled up at him.

The musical tone of her voice and the liquid brightness of her eyes caused Kace to experience a tightening in the lower regions of his body. Whoa! Slow down! he cautioned himself. You'll have her running scared again. He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, honey," he apologized, giving her hand a quick squeeze. "It's fifth-ranked Georgia against top-ranked Pittsburgh."

She wrinkled her nose. "Doesn't sound like it'll be much of a contest to me. Does it to you?"

"Huh," he snorted. "You just wait and see. Georgia will probably tear 'em up. This has been the season for all the number one teams to get whipped." He grinned. "At least, I hope so. I've got a lot riding on the blue and gold."

Courtney grinned slyly. "Mmm, in that case, I think I'll root for Pittsburgh. It just might teach you never to bet."

Kace raised his eyebrows in mock horror. "Woman, them's fightin' words! You mean to tell me you hope that I'll lose the entire dollar I bet on this game?"

Courtney looked at him wide-eyed for several seconds; then they both burst out laughing.

"You see," Kace's voice held a smile, "my son-in-law, Bob, attended the University of Pittsburgh." His eyes sparkled. "Hence the reason for the big bet. Bob and my daughter Susan would have been here tonight, except they had a prior commitment they couldn't get out of."

Shortly, the referee's whistle blew, signaling the start of the game. It was an exciting one with each team scoring its share of touchdowns. The half-time pageantry was beautifully executed with all the bands and the spectacular display of flags. The game ended with the Pitt Panthers victorious over the Georgia Bulldogs. Kace took her ribbing good-naturedly.

The trek to the car didn't take long, even in the throng of people. After riding in companionable silence for a while, Courtney realized that they weren't headed toward her home.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I thought we'd stop by my place for a nightcap before I take you home," he announced calmly.

Courtney's pulse leaped at the thought of being in his company a while longer. But what if... No, she chided herself, he had promised he wouldn't crowd her.

"Do you have any objections?"

She heard the question as if from a great distance. "Objections?" she echoed unevenly. "No, no, I have no objections." At least not at the moment, she added silently.

It didn't take long to reach Kace's home. Like Courtney's, it was in a new

condominium complex, but in a more exclusive section of town. The complex was McCord designed and built, and it was awe-inspiring.

After being escorted inside, Courtney was even more impressed. The split-level design was stunning in its elegant simplicity. Stepping into the den, she felt her feet sink into the sumptuous burnt orange carpeting. A beige velvet sofa sat close to the corner fireplace and the circular staircase that wound to the second floor. From there one could look out over the beam-ceilinged den.

Kace pressed a switch and the matching beige drapes opened to reveal a wall entirely of glass. A sliding panel in the center opened onto a deck. He flipped another switch, instantly dimming the indirect lighting to a warm glow. The room was further bathed in dancing shadows from the cheerfully burning logs in the fireplace. Mesmerized by the room, Courtney didn't hear Kace come up behind her.

"Here, let me take your coat."

His soft voice close to her ear played havoc with her already drugged senses. But he didn't linger.

She breathed shakily as she leaned her head against the inviting softness of the velvet cushions. A short time later, Kace returned with a wine bucket and two glasses.

"This apartment is beautiful," she acknowledged with a smile as she sat up, arching her back to try and bring some energy back into lazy muscles.

There was complete silence in the room except for the sharp intake of his breath as his eyes took in the burgeoning fullness of her breasts. How he ached to hold them in his hand, to bring them to pulsating hardness.

Striving to show none of his emotions, Kace breathed deeply and

smiled. "Thank you," he said, as he set the bucket and glasses down. Then in one smoothly executed movement, he sat beside her, leaned over and filled the glasses, handing her one. "Here's to every moment we spend together," he said, raising his glass to click with hers.

Over the rim, her eyes held his for a long moment, then fell before his gaze. She gave all of her attention to sipping the mellow liquid. Anything, she told herself, to keep her hands and mind busy.

As if in slow motion, Kace leaned over, took the glass of wine from her trembling fingers and placed it on the table.

"Courtney," he groaned huskily, "I've got to kiss you—touch you. Please—don't stop me."

Courtney's body began to quiver with anticipation. But why start something that she had no intention of finishing? she asked herself. On the other hand, what was the harm in letting him kiss her—one last time?

Seeing the tug-of-war across her features, Kace placed his hands on her shoulders. "You wouldn't deny a man dying of thirst, a drink of water, now would you, honey?" he asked urgently. His lips hovered above hers.

"I—"

Her hesitation proved to be her downfall, as Kace lay his warm lips against the parted sweetness of hers. At first it was a light kiss, testing her reaction. But as she sat in stunned immobility, he increased the intensity. It was a joyous union, each sipping on the delights of the other's mouth.

Of their own volition, Courtney's arms reached up to circle his neck. Her body was hot and then cold, as the voice in her brain whispered, Don't do this, yes, do this, do whatever you

want to me, don't ever stop, please stop....

"Courtney!" he whispered, sounding choked. He cupped her face in his hands and rained butterfly kisses across her eyes, her temple, and down to her earlobe. He nibbled and licked the sensitive skin of her ear as if he were an artist painting circles with his tongue.

As he continued his assault on her senses, Courtney felt their bodies slide along the couch, until they rested in a half-sitting, half-lying position.

"Kace!"

Her dazed gasp did nothing to deter his wandering mouth or hands. His fingers were busy unbuttoning her sweater while his mouth was on her throat, the side of her neck and then the creamy expanse of the shoulder he had bared.

Moving lower to the fullness of her breasts, he molded each one in his hand, where they received the loving stroke of his tongue as he painted circle after circle around her nipples.

"Please, Kace—I can't stand—no don't," she pleaded.

"Shh, honey, don't talk," he managed to rasp. His warm breath tantalized her nakedness as his mouth moved back to hover over hers.

Yes, Kace was right, she thought. Now was not the time for talking or listening. Only feelings counted at this moment. And her body was on fire as it melted next to his. She could feel him pressing into her thigh as they lay side by side. She was playing games with a virile man used to appeasing his appetites.

This thought served as a warning bell inside Courtney's head. "Kace—please—let me up." But his mouth had found her bottom lip and he began gently chewing and sucking on it with

his teeth. "Oh, no." Her voice sank to a low cry.

"Oh, yes, yes," he whispered as he kissed her again and again. At the same time, he closed a hand over her breast and thought that nothing he had touched had ever felt more beautiful.

But soon his wandering hands weren't satisfied, so they began roaming from her pulsating breast to her thigh. He caressed her there until he felt compelled to search for further treasures. He slowly began to raise her skirt.

"Please, Courtney," he groaned, "don't make me take you home tonight. Stay with me."

"No—don't ask..."

"Oh, Courtney, you don't know what you're doing to me, what you've already done to me. And," he continued, his voice seductive, "I want more—I want all of you."

The warning bells this time went off with a roaring clang. "No!" she cried, rying almost frantically to disengage herself.

In a rational moment, Courtney realized that if Kace chose not to let her go there would be nothing she could do. She was certainly no match for him.

"Courtney, what the hell?" he muttered incoherently.

"Let me up, I want to go home," she choked.

Kace drew in a breath, and then lowly folded her in the circle of his arms. "Hush, honey," he demanded softly. "Didn't I give you my word I wouldn't do anything you didn't want me to?" She shook her head up and down against his chest. "Courtney, look at me." He sighed at length.

She glanced up to see a liquid sweetness pouring from his eyes. She caught her breath and held it.

"Sooner or later we have to talk."

"Kace, you're wasting..." she began.

"No, Courtney," he stated. "It's you who's wasting your time if you think just because I didn't succeed in getting you in my bed tonight that I'm going to give you up."

Courtney flushed deeply.

"Well, let me assure you," he went on, "that I'm not!" He paused. "I need you, and I want you, like the air I breathe. You're mine, Courtney. Make no mistake about that!"

Again his words left her speechless. At the moment, however, she was too tired, too weary, even to try and think of a suitable rejoinder.

The short trip home was a silent one. Courtney's energy was so drained she couldn't have carried on a conversation even if she had wanted to. After Kace parked in front of her condominium, they walked to the front door.

Taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, Kace leaned toward her. A deep frown drew his thick eyebrows together. "I hate it like hell, but I've got to be out of town for the next few days." A tiny flame leapt in his eyes. "But the minute I get back, we're going to go visit my daughter."

"Kace, I wish you wouldn't plan..." Courtney began, haltingly.

"Courtney, I refuse to argue with you anymore tonight." A faint smile lifted the corners of his lips. "Anyway," he challenged warmly, "haven't you learned by now you're wasting precious energy arguing with me?" His hand moved up to caress her cheek gently.

"Good night, Kace," she said softly, closing the door.

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WHAT HAD awakened her? What time was it? Groggily she reached for the phone. A male voice said, "Courtney, I'm sorry to wake you but I just got in and I..."

"Kace?" she cut in, her voice hesitant, "is something wrong?" He sounded tired.

"No, honey." He paused briefly. "I just wanted to hear your voice. And to let you know I'll pick you up at eight o'clock. Pack a bag, because we'll probably spend the night with Susan and Bob."

Now Courtney was wide-awake. "Kace! No! I can't, what I mean is, I won't—"

"Go back to sleep, Courtney," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

Undoubtedly, Kace McCord was the most obstinate, hardheaded man she had ever known! He never listened to a word she said. She would just have to make him understand when he came to the door that she had no intention of going with him. This time, she promised herself, she would remain firm, no matter how much she had missed him and longed to see him.

Now the disruptive phone call made it more difficult than ever to sleep. The rest of the night was a total loss. She tossed and turned until six, when, deciding she was wasting good time, she crawled out of bed.

After drying her hair and curling the blunt ends with a curling iron, she sat down to apply her makeup. Since she had no intention of going with Kace, she decided to dress casually in a pair of corduroys and a pullover velour sweater, minus a bra.

At exactly eight o'clock, the doorbell chimed. Courtney's heart skidded to a stop at the sight of Kace. He too,

was dressed in jeans and a blue sweater, which enhanced the beauty of his eyes.

A light sprang into his face as his gaze met hers. They looked into each other's eyes, and Courtney found herself wanting to touch him. It wasn't clear who made the first move. They found themselves wrapped in each other's arms.

No words passed between them; none were necessary. Kace was trying to exhibit rigid control as he folded her closer to him, seeking her mouth.

Courtney instantly knew the insistence of his tongue, letting him pillage and plunder at will. Shaken and breathing in gasps, she tore her mouth away, managing to end the devastating attack on her senses.

"Good morning," he whispered, transferring his lips to the side of her neck.

"Good morning to you, too," she echoed none too steadily. She then tried to pull away from him.

"Courtney? Go get your bag and let's get out of here," he ordered huskily.

She shook her head. "I'm—I'm not going."

Kace rubbed the back of his neck before saying carefully, "Forget the bag for now. Let's just go and get something to eat." He paused. "And talk. Please."

She could only nod. Damn him! she thought. Why couldn't he ever take no for an answer? And why couldn't she ever mean what she said and stick to it? She felt angry at herself for her weakness toward him.

After ordering their breakfast at a coffee shop, Kace was the first to break the silence. "Please tell me," he asked tautly, "what happened to make you so distrustful of me." He spread his hands. "And of men in general."

Courtney stared down at her hands, which were clenched in her lap. Why not tell him? she thought dejectedly. Why not get it over with once and for all?

"What happened?" he pressed softly.

Courtney felt her palms grow damp. She swallowed hard. "Two days before our big church wedding, my senior year in college, I walked into my fiancé's apartment and caught him in bed with my roommate." A tremor shook her voice. "I had naively believed that I was the only one in Hal's life." She paused to take a sip of her coffee. "So," she continued, "I walked out of his apartment and out of his life. But that wasn't all. The next day I received a note saying that he and Marilyn had eloped and were leaving the country. Of course, I was left with the gifts, the..." Her voice trailed off to nothing.

Kace looked at her, his eyes filled with tenderness. "You do know you never have to fear anything like that happening with me, don't you?" he asked huskily. "You can trust your love in my hands, my darling. I'll never misuse it or abuse it. You believe me, don't you?"

Courtney swallowed. "It's going to take time, I still—"

His gaze softened. "I know. We'll take it one day at a time." He grinned. "How about starting now? By going to my daughter's? Are you game—clothes or no clothes?"

Her heart turned over at the eagerness in his voice. And when it came down to it, she wanted to be with him. "All right. You win." She smiled. "But I'm chalking up my temporary insanity to the beautiful sunshiny day! Do you understand, Kace McCord?"

SOME TWO AND A HALF HOURS later, Kace pulled up in front of what looked to be a newly constructed house in an exclusive suburb of Lafayette. The city proper had grown so rapidly with the recent oil craze that the majority of the population had moved to the outer areas.

Courtney remarked, "I assume your son-in-law works for one of the big oil companies." She took in the opulent ranch-style house with its perfectly manicured lawn.

"That's right," Kace drawled. "He's working himself up into a top executive position with Sun Oil. He's done it all on his own."

He came around to open her door and as he reached for her hand, the front door of the house opened, and out came a beautiful young woman followed by a man.

Courtney's breath caught in her throat. Susan McCord Davis was expecting a baby!

"Why didn't you tell me?" Courtney hissed.

Impatience hardened Kace's irises as he leaned closer to her. "What the hell?" he began roughly, his words halted by the approach of his daughter.

"Oh, Daddy," exclaimed a radiant Susan as she flung herself into Kace's outstretched arms.

Courtney, leaning against the car, felt very much an outsider as Kace was given a hearty handshake and a slap on the back by his son-in-law. And Susan was still clinging to his arm like a vine. But Courtney at least had time to reorient her scattered emotions from the shock of discovering Susan was pregnant. Why this should have upset her so, she didn't know, but it did.

"Hello, Courtney," Susan smiled. "I'm Susan, and this is my husband Bob. We're so glad you could come."

"Thank you for inviting me," Courtney replied softly, studying the younger woman. The resemblance to Kace was uncanny. Susan had the same perfectly chiseled features, and on her they were beautiful. Her hair was dark brown. She was tall and willowy; her pregnancy enhanced her good looks. When she smiled, she became almost the replica of Kace.

Bob looked to be exactly her height. A wiry mop of russet curls topped his head, and there were freckles across the bridge of his nose. His twinkling brown eyes and warm handshake made Courtney like him on sight.

"Well," Bob teased, "I see this time Kace has fetched himself a real beauty."

Before Courtney could reply, Susan nudged her husband. "Watch it, Bob. Courtney might not take too kindly to your brand of teasing."

"Oh," Kace interposed, "I think she can handle it."

"Dad, you two are planning on spending the night, aren't you?" Susan asked as they walked toward the house.

"Oh, Susan, no, I don't think..." Courtney began.

"Yes," cut in Kace. "We certainly are. Wouldn't miss it for the world." The look he threw Courtney dared her to contradict him.

Courtney forced a smile as she noticed Susan's anxious expression. "It's—it's fine with me, too, if you're sure it won't be too much trouble?"

Susan laughed and patted her stomach. "You can't tell it by looking, but I have nearly four months to go before the baby's due." She sighed.

Courtney looked around as Bob ushered her into the den. The huge room with a high arched ceiling and two skylights dominated the entire left side of the house.

"Do you like the house, Courtney?" Susan smiled proudly. "Dad and Bob built it."

"It's beautiful, but more important, it's comfortable," she complimented warmly.

"That's what I like about it, too," Susan declared. "Now, I know you must be thirsty and probably hungry, as well. So, Dad, why don't you show Courtney the guest room and bath while Bob helps me rustle up a quick snack." She smiled. "It won't be much because Bob has a brisket on the grill for dinner tonight."

The moment they were alone, Kace opened the first door he came to and waited for Courtney to enter. He closed the door behind them, rested against it and appraised Courtney's slender figure with eyes the color of blue marble. "Now," he ordered grimly, "let's have it."

Courtney wrapped her arms around her upper body as if to protect herself. "Kace," she began, "you're making a mountain out of a molehill. I didn't really say anything—"

"I agree. It was the way you said it."

"All right, so I apologize. Does that make you happy?"

"Courtney—I'm waiting," he warned levelly. "Even if it takes all day." His lips were compressed impatiently.

"I was just shocked to see that Susan was pregnant, that's all," she blurted, stung by his sudden hostility.

"And why should that bother you?"

"Because, because, she's—" She broke off.

"—because it means I'm going to be a grandfather. And I take it that bothers you."

"Well, it did. But," she was quick to add, "it doesn't anymore."

"And what, if I may ask, made you change your mind all of a sudden?" he inquired.

Did she care what Kace thought? Yes, she did, she told herself quickly. And there was no use denying it.

"I—I'm sorry," she whispered. "I—I didn't mean—"

Kace shook his head. "No, please don't say any more. I'm the one who should apologize for getting so bent out of shape over nothing." He sucked in his breath and then expelled it slowly.

"Kace..."

He caressed her cheek gently with the back of his knuckles and the familiar ache began deep inside her as she circled his waist with her arms, molding her body to the hard contour of his. "Oh, Kace, please kiss me."

He needed no further encouragement. His mouth bore down into the softness of hers, causing her head to swim. She heard herself groan as his tongue began a search of the inside of her mouth. Courtney felt herself being swept away to another time, another place.

The gentle tap on the door failed to penetrate either of their befuddled senses, until the tap became a rather pronounced knock. "Dad, are you and Courtney in there?" Susan asked, her voice hesitant.

"Yes, we're in here, kitten," Kace finally acknowledged. "Just having a little friendly discussion. We'll be out shortly."

"Uh, that's fine," Susan replied. "We'll wait for you in the den."

A small smile broke across Kace's face as he commented lightly, "I guess I can safely assume that for the time being at least, we've called a truce."

THE NEXT MORNING as Kace drove the winding highway toward home, he talked about an overseas contract that could take him to China for at least three weeks to a month. It would be several days, however, before he knew his plans. A strange feeling settled over Courtney at the possibility of his being away for that long a time.

After a delicious breakfast with Susan and Bob, Kace had been eager to make his departure, as was she. She was dreadfully tired after not having slept well for two nights straight. Her emotions were as tight as a violin string—ready to snap at a moment's notice.

The trip back to New Orleans and home was a pleasant one. Before she was aware of it, Kace was slowing to stop in front of her condominium.

He swung around to face her, his mouth turned downward. "I hate it like hell, but I'm going to be involved the next few days with that overseas project." He sighed. "But this weekend, I want us to take my yacht out into the bay and do some saltwater fishing. How does that sound?"

"That—that sounds fine," Courtney ventured. "I've never been on a yacht—or saltwater fishing, either."

"That makes it even better," he murmured. His thumb stroked the dark smudges beneath her eyes. "So there won't be any misunderstanding later, we will be spending the night on board the yacht."

"Is—IS THIS WHERE we're going to fish?" Courtney's words came out in a halting whisper. But the place where Kace had anchored *The Majestic* instilled that sense of quietness in her. They were well away from the shore, into deeper waters. There was no hu-

man sound around them. The wind and sun were their only companions.

They were on the south side of Lake Pontchartrain, the only accessible area in New Orleans for saltwater sports. Although it was called a lake, it was actually a bay connected to the Gulf of Mexico.

Hearing a shuffling sound behind her, Courtney whirled around to see Kace bending over an ice chest.

Its contents made her jerk back with a horrified gasp. "What is that?" she asked.

Amusement crinkled the corners of Kace's eyes. "It's our bait," he acknowledged. "Live shrimp."

Much to Courtney's trepidation, Kace dipped his hand into the chest and scooped up one of the active little creatures. He then eased the hook on through the shrimp's hard upper shell.

"Now," he declared, "I'm ready to throw this wiggly fellow overboard and catch us a honey of a trout."

Looking behind him, he raised the rod up and back over his head, and with a zip he cast it toward the water. "See, there's nothing to it." He grinned.

Courtney realized she wouldn't have a moment's peace if she didn't follow Kace's lead. Closing her eyes, she reached into the container and came up with a prickly shrimp. Kace's laughter echoed in the wind. She flashed him a hard look before she set about baiting the hook. From then on, it was a piece of cake. In a matter of hours, they had filled an extra cooler to capacity with both speckled and sand trout.

Draping an arm casually around her shoulders, Kace ventured, "Why don't you take yourself below for a hot shower. It'll make you feel better." He squeezed her close for a second. "As soon as I finish cleaning the fish, I'll start dinner."

"Sounds good to me," she said acquiescently.

While she was drying her body with a big towel, the smell of fried fish tantalized her nose. Then her stomach began to make a low rumbling sound. She was hungry.

Courtney had just donned a clean pair of jeans and sweater and was brushing her hair when a tap on the door halted her actions. "Are you decent?" Kace asked.

"Yes, come on down," she answered.

Kace eased his lanky frame into the room. "My, but something sure smells good." He laughed huskily.

Courtney flushed. "It's—it's my bath powder, I suppose." Would there ever come a time when his softhearted compliments wouldn't catch her off guard? "Did you—uh—want me to do something?" she asked.

His eyes darkened. "Yes, I thought maybe you'd watch the french fries while I take a quick shower."

"I'll be right there," she replied briskly. She laid down her brush and patted her hair in place.

By the time she had a platter heaping full of the delicious potatoes, Kace made his appearance. His silver hair was still damp from the shower and rather unruly. He had put on a pair of slim-legged khakis and a T-shirt. She could see his muscles straining against the thin fabric.

All of a sudden, the cabin seemed too small. Her breath caught in her throat and her eyelids fluttered, but she couldn't move.

"Don't look so frightened. Right now, the only thing on my mind is food," he lied glibly. He reached for a chilled bottle of wine and uncorked it. He then filled two glasses and held the chair out for her.

The fish was delicious. The strenuous activity of this afternoon had made them both ravenously hungry.

She helped Kace clear the table and was fumbling with the dirty dishes when instinct told her Kace was standing close behind her. The moment his hands touched her shoulders, Courtney froze.

She was powerless to offer any resistance as he turned her around and pinned her close against his upper body. The side of her cheek lay nestled against his chest.

A shudder ran through her body as Kace began massaging her back with his large callused hand. Courtney realized that if she intended to call a halt it had better be now.

"Kace," she murmured. "Please, let me go—"

"Let you go!" he groaned. "I can't. Not this time. I have to hold you, touch you." His lips began nibbling at the soft area under her ear and then along the side of her neck.

"Oh, Kace," she began achingly. "Shh, don't talk, just feel." His warm breath caressed her neck. "Feel how much I need you."

"Kace—I can't, not yet," she whispered.

His mouth silenced her, his kiss so sweet and tender that she found herself frantically fighting to retain control.

"Courtney, you have to let me love you," he rasped. His voice was raw with passion. "You can't stop me now!"

Courtney's arms slid up around his neck, nothing except her need for him making sense anymore. Gone were re-creations and common sense. All she cared about was soothing the ache that his hands, his mouth had created. Tomorrow would be soon enough to face reality.

Kisses fast becoming not enough, Kace swung her off her feet, and carried her toward the large cabin with the double bunk bed.

*

MOUTHS STILL clinging, they fell as one onto the bedspread. Courtney felt his need growing against her as she raised her hand to touch his face, his lips with gentle fingers.

"Oh, Courtney, I've dreamed of this moment so many times," he whispered, their lips only a hairbreadth apart.

"Me, too," she returned shakily.

Needing no further encouragement, his tongue darted out and lightly circled the inside of her lips. Her skin began to tingle.

They moved against each other in a fierce embrace that left her body screaming for more. Clothes were now a cumbersome nuisance, preventing them from discovering the joys of each other's bodies.

He raised his head and gazed down at her with burning eyes. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are? How sweet you taste? How desperately I need you?"

Courtney stared at him, mesmerized by his eyes, his voice. Speech was impossible. She felt something break loose inside her, something hot and sweet that flooded her limbs and left them trembling.

He continued his advance, now lifting her sweater to plunder the lushness of her body. His hand gently curved around a breast and brought it to pulsating life with gentle stroking and teasing, the nipples as hard as diamonds.

With a burning need to know and see all of her, Kace began to pull the sweater from her body. She watched as

he flung the garment aside, turning to feast his eyes on the satin whiteness of her breasts.

"Oh, Courtney, I love the shape of you," he said, and began to stroke her breasts with fingers as gentle as velvet.

Courtney lay quivering beneath his practiced touch, then reached up to touch his silver hair, only to delve her fingers deep into it as Kace seared her nipples with his hot moist tongue. She gasped her pleasure aloud as his tongue made its way around the underside of her breast, and downward to her stomach.

But when he encountered the button on her jeans, he muffled a soft curse, and groped to pull the tight-fitting pants from her hips.

With trembling hands, she joined in the efforts and was soon lying naked before him. The moonlight draped a veil of silvery light over her body.

He quickly removed his own clothes, drinking in the beauty of her body as he did so. Stretching out beside her, he ran loving hands over her perfectly shaped legs, the insides of her thighs, coming to rest for a moment on the flatness of her stomach. His mouth followed the path of his hands. When he caressed her navel with his mouth and then buried his tongue there, she grasped his head, again tangling her fingers in his hair.

She began to move against him. Excitement and anticipation caused her breath to grow shallow and ragged.

"Oh, Kace!" she moaned.

He moved upward with the agility of a cougar and kissed her moist and parted lips.

Kace ached for her. He was desperate to take her, but he had to know she was ready for him. For he wanted their first coupling to be beautiful. To be perfect.

His hands and fingers, with silken softness, explored her secret sweetness. Courtney felt a hot liquid course through her at his gentle touch.

Wrenching her mouth from his, Courtney whispered, "Kace, please—take me!" She wanted him. Now. She wanted to feel him inside her. To know and feel what it was like to be truly loved by a man.

His obsession for her in that moment overcame all else as gently, he stroked her legs apart and then moved over her. He brought his lips to her breasts and tasted their sweetness once more before completing the last stage of their sensuous journey.

Cautiously he entered her and began slow measured thrusts. Courtney felt herself drowning in the wonderment of it all. Impatient for all of him, she grabbed his shoulders for support and arched herself against him.

"Courtney, no!" Kace rasped as his thrusting force met a surprising barrier.

"Please, don't stop. Not now. It's all right," she whispered urgently as she stroked his face.

He groaned and quickened his thrusts and soon found himself nestled completely within her satin folds. From there the pace slowed with each move, bringing her past the pain and into a world of erotic delight.

"Yes, yes, yes," she heard herself whisper, as her hips tilted to meet his, driving him deeper and deeper into her softness.

A shiver of wild delight washed over her as together they reached the heights of ecstasy. Afterward, he moaned as he buried his face in her hair.

The room was still—except for the pounding of their hearts. Tentatively, Courtney turned and kissed his hand that lay resting against her cheek. Then she touched his shoulder with her

tongue. Although his body was moist with perspiration, it tasted delicious.

Soon, she felt him relax completely. He rolled over on his side and took her with him. No words were spoken as he kissed her lips tenderly. Then with a sigh, he drew her head down to rest in the crook of his arm.

Although his heart had ceased its pounding, his mind had not. A virgin! He still couldn't believe she had been untouched by a man. But she had satisfied him so. And he was so delighted by her. He sighed as he held her slight body close. He never wanted to let her go. Even now, as he held her, he felt his insides quiver from wanting to repeat what had just taken place. He longed to show her, free of pain, how it was to love and be loved.

Courtney lay in a dreamy state of contentment. She felt him swing his leg gently over hers, pinning her partially under him once more.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked softly.

"No. It was wonderful," she responded.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd never known a man?" he chastised mildly.

"You—you never asked me." Her voice held a tremor.

He sighed. "I should have known. But you responded so ardently to my every move..." His voice trailed off.

"I'm—I'm glad I pleased you," she whispered.

"Oh, honey," he groaned, "you are absolutely perfect."

He turned her face slightly toward him and moved his lips against hers. His hands had replaced his leg and were causing strange shooting sensations throughout her body. She felt her nipples harden as wandering fingers surveyed the softness of her stomach and then sought her hips, only to delve lower to her vault of velvet.

From his feathery strokes, she felt her own passion rise anew. She let her hands move by their own accord, lower and lower, exploring his body, calling his name.

She felt him swell and rise to the occasion. She gasped as his mouth found her nipples, drawing on their sweetness. Then he rolled her onto her back, entered her gently and began the slow, delicious movement again.

This time their bodies fit together like pieces of an ancient puzzle. As they moved, Courtney surrendered herself to a fiery flood of sensations. They both shuddered at the same time and floated from heaven back to earth.

They lay spent, wrapped in each other's arms for a timeless moment before he moved from her. Immediately he pulled her close again, pressing the length of her body against his.

With his hands at her breast, she heard his breath become measured and deep. She knew he had fallen into a deep sleep.

Too tired to wonder or to think about the change that had just taken place in her life, Courtney covered their moist bodies with a sheet and drifted into a dreamless sleep to the steady lapping of waves against the yacht.

THE SAME movement that had rocked Courtney to sleep awakened her late the next morning. In the wink of an eye, the whole of last night came thundering down upon her. Barely breathing, a sharp pain stabbed at her heart. She turned and saw Kace standing at the porthole, his back to her. Clad only in his jeans, he was unaware of her scrutiny.

In the clear light of dawn she wondered what he was thinking, as hot tears pricked her eyes. She had given

her virginity to this man, something she didn't think she was capable of ever doing. Was she sorry? No. She had wanted him. He was the only man who had been able to make her body and her emotions respond.

Could this all-consuming feeling she had for him be love? Could it be possible to love a man she had known such a short time? Her heart raced madly at the thought.

He turned then. "How long have you been awake?" he ventured huskily.

"Not long," she admitted, averting her gaze.

"Courtney," he demanded softly, "look at me."

She pressed her lips together and endeavored to present a calm facade.

Kace sighed as he took in the faintly bruised shadows under her eyes. "Courtney, I want us to get married. This afternoon, if possible. If not, tomorrow morning for sure."

Courtney was flabbergasted! She stared at him round-eyed and confused. When she found her voice, she clipped, "You're kidding!"

"Courtney, I told you once before that I don't make idle statements," he reproved in a deadly calm voice, "so never make the mistake of doubting me again."

Hurt and anger pierced her heart at the same time. She felt like a cornered animal being lured into a cage. She would admit that yes, she had been ready for the physical mating with Kace. But a mental commitment was something else again. She might love him, but she still couldn't face the responsibility of marriage. She had her career and her life-style. Marriage wouldn't fit well into either.

Anyway, hadn't he asked her to marry him because he felt a sense of guilt at having taken her virginity? The

word *love* had yet to cross his lips. She simply couldn't risk getting hurt all over again. This time she had much more to lose.

"Courtney, you've got to listen to me!"

His demanding voice broke into her reverie. She shook her head firmly, tangled curls shadowing her face. "No, Kace," she admonished. "I only have to listen to myself. The answer is no. I cannot and will not marry you."

His body stiffened and she knew that he was hanging on to his temper by a thread.

Slowly expelling his breath, Kace stated simply, "Okay then, if you won't marry me, we'll just have to live together."

Her lips began to tremble. She didn't know what to say or do next. Some of the best moments of her life had been those she had spent in his arms. Here was her chance to have him without the ties of commitment. Was her hesitation because she knew he didn't love her?

"Kace, I—"

"Please," he cut in swiftly, "before you say no, I promise there'll be no pressures, no ties."

"No, Kace," she told him firmly. She must make him accept her answer. Now. Before she had time to weaken. "Why can't we leave things the way they are for now? I'm not ready—I can't—I need more time—I—" She felt hot tears prick her eyes.

"For God's sake, Courtney, how much more time do you need?"

"I—I don't know. I just need time, that's all," she pleaded. Her eyes were shimmering with unshed tears.

For a split second, Kace was tempted to grab her and shake some sense into her hard head. But he knew, with certainty, he would only frighten her more.

So it was with a heavy heart that he said, "All right, Courtney, for now we'll play it your way." He sounded as if he was trying to convince himself as well as her that he would be able to wait her out. "Under the circumstances, I think we'd better return to New Orleans, don't you?"

It was shortly after one o'clock when *The Majestic* sailed into the harbor at Lake Pontchartrain.

KACE CALLED the next day and every day thereafter as the month of February zipped by with amazing speed. If Courtney wasn't conversing with Kace on the phone, she was with him at least four out of the seven nights a week. But there was a difference in his attitude toward her.

Although he treated her with the same gentle courtesy as always, he never once tried to entice her to share his bed. It was almost as if their passion-filled night on the yacht had never happened. She was at a loss as to how to handle the abrupt change in their relationship. Could he by any chance be losing interest in her? She asked herself this question over and over.

Then on Valentine's Day he surprised her with a beautiful dainty gold and diamond necklace. Her first thought was to refuse the gift because of its connotations. But the look on Kace's face changed her mind. He was as excited as a small child seeing Santa for the first time.

Courtney saw the arrival of March with Kace still behaving in much the same manner. On the surface, he was determined; but there was a certain part of himself he held aloof.

ON FRIDAY afternoon, the first of March, the telephone rang at Paper-Work-Plus. It was Kace.

"Are you about to close up for the day?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact I was," Courtney replied. "Why?"

He chuckled. "Because I'm going to treat you to another deliciously prepared dinner by none other than Chef McCord." He paused. "Can I expect you by seven-thirty?"

Courtney's mouth went dry. "All— all right."

Kace was smiling broadly when he opened the door to admit her. He looked great in a pair of dark slacks and a pale yellow knit shirt.

"Something smells delicious!" she exclaimed.

"But not nearly as delicious as you look." He grinned. "Red is definitely your color."

"Thank you," she murmured hastily as she made her way to the dining room.

The table was beautifully decorated, complete with fine crystal and candles.

"Well, I'm waiting for the compliment. Let's have it!" he pressed softly from close behind her.

"It's—it's lovely," she answered. "But I don't understand." She turned to look at him. "What's the occasion?"

Kace shrugged. "Nothing really. I just thought you could use a good meal." He paused, reaching out a finger and gently rubbing it across the dusky spots below her eyes. "I know you've had a hard week."

Courtney felt a sweet yearning shoot through her body at his tender touch and his thoughtfulness. Was this man to remain an enigma to her forever?

"I hope you like lasagna," he remarked. "I've been up to my elbows in noodles and ricotta cheese nearly all afternoon," he went on. "But it's ab-

solutely fantastic, even if I do say so myself!"

And it was. Everything was perfect—the crisp garden salad, the lasagna, the pull-apart bread and the red wine that accompanied the meal. They both ate with a hearty appetite, feeling no need to make idle conversation. Later, Kace did invite her to join him, Susan and Bob shopping for antiques in the French Quarter the next day, to be followed that night by dinner at a club. Courtney promptly accepted, never passing up a chance to explore the old town of New Orleans.

After turning down Kace's offer of apple strudel for dessert, Courtney sighed with contentment as she watched him refill their wineglasses.

"Let's enjoy our wine in the den, shall we?" he ventured.

Although the evening wasn't cold, Kace had built a small fire in the fireplace to take the chill off.

"Would you like to hear something on the stereo?" he asked.

"Sounds good to me."

Momentarily, the haunting voice of a jazz singer filled the room.

Courtney felt her heart begin to pound in her throat as he made his way back to sit beside her.

He reached out and began to massage her shoulder gently. The soothing motion helped her relax.

"Mmm, that feels so good," she murmured.

Kace was right; she and Amy had indeed put in another bad week. One of the machines had broken down, and they had been operating one short.

She was so lost in her thoughts she wasn't aware when his touch changed from one of tender administering to one of gentle persuasion until she felt his fingers working their same magic on her breast, arousing her nipple to button hardness. His hand soon stilled,

and Courtney watched in utter bemusement as Kace lowered his head and laid his lips on hers. It was a tormentingly gentle kiss, prolonged by Courtney's arms locking unashamedly around his neck. She returned his kiss with a fervor that was devastating in its intensity.

Kace, too, was visibly shaken. He abruptly broke the embrace and pushed her slightly away from him. Then he stood up, running a hand around the back of his neck, and walked to the middle of the room.

After a moment, he pointedly looked down at his watch. "I'd better take you home." He paused, obviously still shaken. "Tomorrow will be a long day for you."

Courtney swallowed hard. She did not want to go home; she did not want to go to sleep. She wanted to spend the entire night making love to him. But she did not say so. To speak so openly of her desire was beyond her capacity.

Courtney managed to keep her voice on an even keel. "I'm ready when you are," she declared.

THE NEXT morning, Courtney awakened with a pounding headache. After finding no relief from several cups of coffee, she swallowed two aspirin, hoping that by the time Kace arrived she would be feeling better.

If she had good sense, she would cancel the outing, she had told herself over and over. But her heart continued to be the victor over her head.

Bob and Susan were waiting in the car and seemed glad to see Courtney. There was nonstop chatter among them all the way to the French Quarter. Kace parked the car adjacent to Royal Street.

No matter how often she visited the old section of town, she never tired of

it. With Shrove Tuesday and Mardi Gras approaching, excitement was in the air. For the past two weeks, floats and bands had lined the streets, along with dancing and torchlight parades.

"I'd love to take part in the final celebration this coming Tuesday," said Susan, grinning, as they strolled down Royal Street. "But I'm afraid my tummy might get in the crowd's way."

Courtney laughed. "Much as I hate to admit it, you may be right," she said, her eyes dancing.

The infectious sound of her laughter drew Kace's attention to the curve of her lips, to the light shining from her eyes. She looked up at him in time to see something flare up in his eyes, and then it was gone, leaving her wondering if it had been her imagination.

"Come on, you two," Susan teased, breaking into the intimate moment. "If I'm to follow the doctor's orders, we're going to have to get the lead out," she added.

A frown marred Courtney's face as they hurried to catch up. "What did your doctor tell you to do?" she asked.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Would you believe—walk." She laughed. "Morning, noon and night."

"When exactly is the baby due?" Courtney asked.

Before Susan could reply, Bob cut in. "My dear wife thinks she has another month, but the doctor told her it could come anytime now."

"What!" cried Courtney. "You mean there's a chance you could have our baby anytime and you're here with all this crowd, shopping?"

"Is what Bob said true, kitten?" Kace followed quietly.

"Oh, pooh, Dad." Susan laughed. "I might look like I'm going to deliver any minute now, but I can assure you and Courtney that I'm not. I've never felt better. Trust me, please."

Kace seemed to relax under her calm assurance. "All right, we'll play it your way. But if you begin to feel the least bit tired or uncomfortable, you'd better let us know." He turned toward Bob. "Does that meet with your approval?"

"It's fine by me," Bob replied. "She's calling the shots."

Courtney was convinced they must have looked in every antique shop on Royal Street. They stopped later in the afternoon for refreshments and spent the time before they were served laughing and talking. Kace was in fine humor, teasing Courtney every chance he got. His strange behavior of yesterday seemed like a dream. She couldn't have asked for him to be any more attentive, and wasn't at all surprised when his hand slid caressingly down her arm and caught her own.

Susan finally began to tire, although she hated to admit it. They all agreed to eat an early snack at Al Hirt's Place on Bourbon Street and then call it a day.

After being seated, Courtney and Susan made their way to the ladies' lounge.

"Whew! I'm beat," Courtney exclaimed. She began pulling a comb through her tangled curls. "Where in the world do you get all your energy?"

Failing to get an answer to her question, Courtney turned toward Susan. What she saw made her freeze. Susan was bent over double, clutching her stomach and gasping for breath.

Events from that moment on passed in a blur for Courtney. However, there were certain things she would remember always. Somehow she managed to make Susan more comfortable on the floor before running for Kace and Bob. Kace took complete control of the situation, getting an ambulance to the

scene in what seemed like only minutes to Courtney.

Bob hovered over Susan while the paramedics gently lifted her onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. Bob rode with her, leaving Courtney and Kace to follow in the car.

By the time they pulled into the emergency room parking area, Susan was already being examined behind closed doors. Bob was waiting with bated breath for the verdict from the doctor on call.

When Dr. Wainwright did come out, he ushered them into a quiet room adjacent to emergency. He told them that Susan was in labor with complications and that in all probability he would have to deliver the baby before morning. He added, however, that as far as he could tell, both mother and baby should be just fine.

At 4:00 a.m., a smiling Dr. Wainwright emerged to inform Bob that he had a bouncing five-pound two-ounce baby girl. And that mother and daughter were fine.

Bob and Kace embraced in silent thankfulness, then reached out to Courtney, pulling her into their happy circle. After Bob was allowed to slip into Susan's room, Kace turned to Courtney. "Let's go home," he murmured.

By the time Kace had maneuvered the Mercedes into her driveway, Courtney could hardly keep her eyes open. He obviously had something on his mind because he put the car in park.

Hesitantly, she spoke. "Are—you are you going to stay at the hospital most of today? That is, after you get some sleep," she added.

He sighed. "No, I won't be able to." He paused. "If Susan is still doing

okay, I have a plane to catch this evening."

"Where are you going?" she asked with a waver in her voice.

"It's that trip to China," he stated briefly.

"Oh, I see," she whispered.

But she didn't. Why had he waited until now, of all times, to make his plans known? she wondered bitterly.

"No, you don't see," he murmured savagely. "That's the whole damn problem. You never have!"

"What exactly do you mean?" Courtney demanded.

Suddenly his shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry. Just forget what I said. I'll call you before I leave."

"Don't bother," she ground out, at the same time averting her head. She refused to let him see the tears in her eyes.

"I'll call you," he repeated, then saw her safely into the house. Wordlessly, Kace pulled her close and kissed her with such fierce passion that it astounded her. Without a word of goodbye, he turned and left her standing like a zombie as he walked out the door, closing it firmly behind him.

Somehow she dragged herself to bed, where she cried until exhaustion finally plunged her into a deep sleep.

*

THE DAY before Kace was due to come home, Courtney decided to go to the office early. As she unlocked the door and stepped inside, she stopped dead in her tracks.

"Oh no! Oh no!" she wailed aloud as she looked at a room filled with computer paper. It was everywhere. The entire office was knee deep in it.

The machine that had given them trouble all week sat proudly mocking

her as it continued calmly to spit out paper after paper.

"Oh, Amy, how could you?" she cried in despair. For it was apparent that Amy, in her haste to get away for a holiday, had forgotten to call the serviceman to come and disconnect it.

Courtney was weeping as she plowed her way through the rubble to get to the errant machine. Upon reaching it, she pushed the off button several times, but nothing happened. She quickly punched other switches, but the machine kept purring, its lights flashing.

"Damn!" she muttered. There was no way she could unplug it either, because the plug was in the back against the wall, and the computer was too heavy for her to move.

In a frenzy of frustration and anger, Courtney kicked it several times, but it retaliated by cranking the paper out even faster than before.

It was a sure thing now that every contract in the machine was damaged or lost—Kace's most assuredly. And his companies were by far the most important.

Suddenly it was all too much. The mess, plus her worry over Kace, finally broke her spirit. She crumpled to her knees, angry sobs wracking her body.

This was how Kace found her.

"Damn it to hell! What's happened in here?" His voice shook the room. "Please tell me there aren't any of *my* contracts in all this mess?"

Courtney jumped up and whirled around. She had recognized his voice, but he had frightened her, being a day early.

Kace thought, as he took in Courtney's stormy disarray, that she had never looked lovelier. But when he reached out a hand to touch her, she lunged backward.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she cried, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

For a moment Kace was taken aback, but his rigid control soon resurfaced. "All right, I won't touch you," he said. "But at least let me see if I can help salvage something out of this mess."

Courtney shook her head negatively but did not speak. Nothing mattered now except getting her emotions under control. She knew she was overreacting. Her nerves reminded her of a tennis racket that had been strung too tight.

Kace had meanwhile taken matters into his own hands. He had pulled the machine away from the wall and was just bending over to examine it when she found her voice.

"Go away, Kace. Just go away," she said dully. "I don't need you now." The moment the words passed her lips, she wished she could recall them. But it was too late.

Kace slammed the lid down on the machine and crossed the room in two gigantic strides.

Courtney stared at him, terror reflected on her face. She thought, for a moment, he was going to strike her. Instead he grabbed her and jerked her tightly against him. She felt the heat of his body and smelled the clean fragrance that was always a part of him. His kiss was savage in its intensity, as Courtney struggled to free herself.

It was her bid for freedom combined with her whimpers of pain that finally penetrated Kace's tormented senses. His hold on her slackened immediately, but when his darting tongue began to stroke her teeth and move to tickle the inside of her mouth, she was lost.

In that moment, she ceased to fight. Her body began to respond to him and

she knew that she wanted Kace as much as he wanted her. Hadn't most of her problems these last few weeks stemmed from being without him? From not feeling his lips, his arms? Then why deny herself this stolen moment of passion? It could very well be her last.

"Courtney?"

There was complete silence in the room now except for Kace's labored breathing.

She looked at him, making no attempt to mask her desire.

Kace's hand trembled as he slowly urged her toward the floor. They melted together, using the sea of papers as their bed and he leaned over her, fusing his lips to hers in a long, passionate kiss.

"Since I've been gone, I've thought of nothing but you," he said hoarsely. "You're like a drug in my blood." Then he bent again and kissed her.

Courtney felt a fire begin to smolder inside her as Kace's fingers undid her blouse and then her bra. Her breasts exploded free from their confinement, only to become encased once again by his hands and mouth. He worshiped the ivory globes until they were brought to pulsating fullness from his caresses.

The fires of passion threatened to rage out of control as his hand left her breast and wandered under her skirt to knead her thigh.

She kept her eyes shut as he stripped her clothes from her body, then hastily removed his own. In the muted glow of the dimly lit room, she reveled in his nakedness.

"Kace," she whispered achingly.

"Shh, don't talk." He opened his mouth on her nipple, teasing it, and she shivered, her fingers in his hair. Aroused deeply by his mouth scorching her skin, Courtney lazily, madden-

ingly, glided her hands down his sides, across his back, around over him and back up again.

"Oh, yes," he rasped as he reached to part her thighs, where he gently praised the center of her being. The intimacy of touch left her weak, turned her bones to liquid.

"Together, Courtney." His words floated down to her. "Now... together."

Before Courtney realized it, he had penetrated her—not impatiently, but with a slow deliberate movement that locked them together in an inescapable passion. Lips and tongues touching, they moved as one in a slow, agonizing rhythm that brought them together in an intense explosion of passion.

It was a while before Courtney or Kace moved. The force of their love-making had taken its toll on both of them, leaving their bodies sated and their minds drained.

When Kace finally stood up and reached for his clothes, the full impact of the situation hit Courtney. Had she taken leave of her senses? Yes, she admitted, for an insane moment, she had lost herself to this gentle devil.

Neither one spoke as they dressed, but shortly Kace turned to her. "You know we can't go on like this, don't you?"

"I know," she whispered as tears clogged her throat, cutting off further speech. She could feel the tension in the room.

"I want us to be married. Today," Kace declared.

"Why?" she asked softly.

"You know the answer to that question already," he said wearily. "But I'll tell you anyway. I want you and I need you so much that my guts stay ripped to pieces because of it. Isn't that reason enough?" he added softly.

Courtney controlled her trembling lips by biting down on them hard. She turned her back to him. No, it wasn't reason enough. Wanting and needing were not the same as loving. If he did not love her, then...

"Kace, I'm—I'm not ready. I—I need more time. I—" She broke off in an effort to grope for the right words.

"No!" he bellowed. "Damn it, Courtney, I'm tired of sharing only moments with you," he said. "Don't you understand I want us to share a lifetime?"

A sharp stabbing pain tore at her heart, but still she could not commit herself. She was afraid.

"I'm not leaving here until you give me an answer!"

"Don't push me, Kace!" she lashed out at him. "Just leave me alone!" She paused. "I need breathing room. I can't face the thought of marriage now. Maybe not ever!"

There was a silence as deep as the Grand Canyon following her outburst. Courtney held her breath, waiting for his reaction.

His head snapped back as if she had struck him. "Well, that about says it all." His voice was dead. "I won't bother you again."

Courtney stood frozen as the door slammed behind him.

HE HAD GONE over that scene in her office at least a thousand times. And each time it had the power to chill her to the very core. She kept telling herself she was better off without Kace—that she did not need him. But after a month of not seeing him, she knew she was playing a fool's game.

She must, she told herself, try to put her life back together again. After all, she still had her good health, a booming career and her independence.

Those things had been enough once. Couldn't they be again?

She had left work early for a change one day and had just gotten out of the shower and into a robe, when the telephone rang.

Hesitantly, she lifted the receiver. "Hello."

"Courtney, this is Michael," a deep voice announced.

"Oh, hi, Michael," Courtney responded warmly. "What can I do for you?"

He laughed. "Would you take pity on me and let me buy you the biggest steak dinner in New Orleans?"

Courtney felt her eyebrows pucker. "Are you serious? Where's Barbara?"

He sighed. "She's taken the kids to visit my parents in Texas for a few days, and I'm about to climb the walls, it's so lonesome."

"Are you trying to make me feel sorry for you?" returned Courtney blandly.

"Well, you might say that," he laughed.

"Michael," she began, "I'd really love to, but I'd better pass—"

He interrupted her. "Ah, Courtney, come on, be a sport," he pleaded. "Anyway, I need to discuss a couple of those contracts I turned over to you yesterday."

"Oh, all right," she laughed, admitting defeat.

As Courtney dressed, her thoughts centered on Michael and Barbara Evans. They had been good friends of hers since college days. But it was only recently that they had renewed their old friendship when Michael had opened a new business in New Orleans. It had snowballed to such an extent that he contracted with Paper-Work-Plus to take care of the overflow.

Courtney looked sensational in a silk outfit of a rich deep purple. The crepe de chine blouse and soft-pleated pants made her look as slender and elegant as a model.

Shortly, she found herself being seated in one of New Orleans's fanciest new restaurants in the uptown Garden District.

After the waiter served their drinks and took their order, Michael began describing his business problems. He had Courtney's undivided attention until she happened to glance toward the entrance as a couple came through the door.

Kace McCord wore a pale blue suit that showed off to perfection his silver-gray hair. A lovely older woman clung gracefully to his arm. To Courtney, they both looked blissfully happy. She forced herself to meet his gaze as he looked around the room. But he merely acknowledged her presence with a cold nod. Courtney felt both anger and suppressed desire surge through her.

These feelings were followed by another emotion as the truth hit her with a staggering blow. She loved Kace. It was as simple as one, two, three. She loved him. And probably had, long before she ever shared his bed.

Michael, watching the conflicting play of emotions cross her face, asked with concern, "Courtney, what the hell? You look like you've seen a ghost. Does that guy mean something to you?"

Courtney sat motionless.

"Courtney?" Michael repeated. "Do you want me to take you home?"

She shook her head. "No, please. I'm fine now, really I am," she lied easily. "I just saw someone I wasn't expecting to, that's all." But it took every ounce of fortitude she possessed to sit there for two hours and pretend

that her life hadn't come tumbling down around her.

A short time later, Courtney found herself alone with a lead weight around her heart and a bucket full of unshed tears.

Seeing Kace again had brought back all the longings and desire she felt for him. And it was ironic, she thought bitterly, that with the moment she realized she loved him also came the certainty that she had lost him.

Now that it was too late, everything became so clear. If she couldn't have Kace, with or without his love, nothing else mattered. Her career, her independence, and her life-style all counted for naught.

*

ONE AFTERNOON, two weeks after she had seen Kace at the restaurant, her doorbell rang. It was Susan.

Courtney's face broke into a fleeting smile. "Well, hello," she said. "Come in."

"I hope I'm not bothering you," Susan said. "Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Of course," Courtney answered. "but what do you want to talk about?"

"Kace," Susan replied bluntly. "Courtney, Dad really has me worried. Something's terribly wrong with him."

"What's happened? Has he been hurt?" she asked urgently.

"No—no, it's nothing like that," Susan answered. "But I'm positive I have to do with you."

Courtney tried to gather her scattered wits. "Me?" she exclaimed, picturing in her mind the other woman clinging to his arm. "Whatever I wrong, I hardly think it's because of me."

"Courtney, please!" Susan was really distressed now. "I know that you two are no longer seeing each other. Dad came to Lafayette about a week and a half ago. He was a stranger. He was aloof, moody and evasive." She paused to wipe a tear. "All I managed to get out of him was that he loved you desperately and that—"

"What did you say!" Courtney began pacing back and forth across the carpet. Her mind was ticking wildly.

Susan followed her with large puzzled eyes. "Well, I—I said that he loved you. Surely you know that. While my father was seeing you, he was happier than I've seen him since my mother died."

Perspiration oozed from Courtney's palms and her mouth was pasty dry. "No—no, I didn't know," she whispered.

Susan looked confused now. "Well, what I came to tell you is that he's disappeared. No one's seen or heard from him since the day he left my house."

"Disappeared?" Courtney repeated abstractly.

"Yes," Susan sighed. "Bob nearly knocked the door down at his house. If he's there, which I doubt, he wouldn't answer. Also, we've checked with everybody else who might have seen him." She shrugged. "Nothing."

"There's bound to be a reasonable explanation. I'm sure he's all right. Just don't go borrowing trouble," Courtney advised, trying to make the younger woman feel better. But it was difficult with a knot of fear in her own stomach.

"I feel sure that sooner or later he'll get in touch with you. And when he does, you'll tell him to call me, won't you?"

"Of course, you know I will. But there's no chance I'll hear from him."

Courtney was still pacing. "I made sure of that," she added bitterly.

Susan walked to the door. "I have to go," she said. "Bob and the baby are waiting for me in the car. You were my last hope."

Courtney, after closing the door, barely made it to the couch before she broke into unrestrained sobs. During the heart-wrenching hours that followed came the awareness that she had let what one man had done blind her to the goodness and kindness in another. She berated herself for letting "things" like her business become more important to her than loving and being loved.

In that moment, she knew what she had to do. First thing in the morning, she would try and find Kace. She would do anything to feel his arms around her again. She prayed that she would be given another chance.

DAYLIGHT was barely peeping over the horizon when Courtney pulled her car into the marina parking lot at Lake Pontchartrain. Her heart was palpitating so fast she had to take several deep breaths to slow it down.

She was positive Kace was on *The Majestic*. Trembling a little, Courtney climbed aboard the yacht. There was no sign of Kace at all, but she went forward to the entrance that led to the cabins and knocked loudly. There was no answer, so she made her way down the stairs and halted outside the door of the main cabin.

Summoning her courage, she called, "Kace! Kace, I know you're in there. I want to talk to you."

Silence.

Courtney pressed her lips together as she reviewed the situation. What to do? If Kace refused to see her, she would have to leave. Tears of self-pity

pricked her eyes. She tried the door-knob, but it was locked.

Shoulders drooped in defeat, she turned to make her way back up the stairs, when the door swung open and a voice said, "What do you want?"

Almost jumping out of her skin, Courtney spun around to stare at Kace. His face was drawn and haggard with several days' growth of beard. His loose-fitting khakis stressed the gauntness of his thighs and hips. And his usual immaculate silver hair was unkempt.

A wave of love for him swept over her as she looked at his dear face, unable to say a word.

"I asked you what you wanted," Kace repeated.

"Isn't it obvious?" she finally burst out. "I—I came to see you."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"It doesn't matter anymore what I think," he muttered. "Anyway, you've already had your say. Just go away and leave me alone."

Forcing herself to swallow the sob that threatened to strangle her, she said again, "Kace, I have to talk to you."

"I told you we have nothing to say..."

She didn't let him finish. "You may not have anything to say, but I do! Please listen to me."

"Courtney, it's over!" he grated ruthlessly.

"I love you," she countered softly.

His only reaction to her words was to clench his jaw. He was not about to make it easy for her.

After what seemed like an eternity, he spoke, "When did you come to that conclusion?"

She quivered. "The—night I—I saw you with that woman." She blinked back the tears. "I—I couldn't stand the thought of you touching her—the

the way you touched me," she continued. "And I—I realized that I loved you." She paused. "But, but I didn't think you—you loved me until..."

"What! Didn't think I loved you!" he spat. "Where did you come up with that nonsense?" His eyes were dark angry pools as he stared at her unrelentingly for a timeless moment and then with a groan, reached out and drew her to him, fastening his hungry mouth on hers.

A weakness invaded Courtney's limbs as his kiss deepened. She clung to him in desperation.

Finally wrenching his mouth away, Kace moaned as he cradled her head against his thundering chest.

"How, Courtney," he rasped, "could you have possibly thought I didn't love you?"

"You—you never told me," she sobbed.

"Never told you!" he admonished. "I told you in a thousand different ways. I told you with my voice, my hands, my lips, my tongue..." Courtney shivered in his arms as his words tore her heart to shreds.

"Oh, Kace," she murmured, "I've been such a fool."

"We both have," he confessed softly as he molded his lips to hers. The kiss lasted until he scooped her up in his arms and carried her the short distance to the bed.

It didn't matter that the covers were a jumbled-up mess. All that mattered now was healing the deep wounds from their long weeks of separation.

They undressed each other with agonizing slowness. By the time they lay together with nothing between them, Courtney felt like a volcano ready to erupt.

"Oh, Courtney," she heard him rasp before his mouth claimed hers. His searching tongue sought hers, meeting

and tasting until desire raged through her body.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest as their lips devoured one another. Finally Kace pulled his mouth from hers and looked deep into her eyes. She caught her breath at the love she saw reflected there.

Her hand caressed Kace's lips softly, answering his vow of love with one of her own. He cupped one of her already taut breasts, stroking it into pulsating warmth. He then moved his head lower, taking the waiting tip of first one breast and then the other between his lips.

Courtney moaned from the havoc his teeth and lips were creating. She had been without him so long that she was desperate for him. Again she heard her own moan rise and spill from her lips as Kace moved lower to taste the soft sweetness of her skin.

She encouraged his worship of her body. It was wonderful to be able to surrender to him, and soon her hands moved of their own volition, encouraging him to return to the parted invitation of her lips. It was her turn to set him on fire. Slowly she kissed his mouth, then roamed to kiss his cheek, his ear. Her lips followed a path down his neck to his chest where she pulled and nuzzled the hair that met her lips.

Kace's breathing had increased to a hard, irregular beat. "Please, Courtney, I need you. Now!" His voice was full of anguish.

She didn't answer. Instead, she shifted her body, blanketing his. With a satisfied gasp, Kace locked them together. She felt him to the very depth of her soul as he proceeded to take her on a soaring journey of pleasure so in-

tense that she cried out in joy, slumping against him when the rapture ended.

Afterward, they stayed close. With their physical hunger now appeased, they were free to open their hearts and minds to each other.

Kace shifted, propping himself up on an elbow. He gazed lovingly down into her face. "I was so afraid I'd lost you," he murmured huskily. "I still find it hard to believe you're here beside me now." Kace brushed his thumbs along her jawline. "How would you like to become Mrs. Kace McCord, say in about three hours' time?" he inquired easily.

"I'm game!" Courtney challenged, happiness still bubbling in her voice.

His relief was evident as he gave her a quick kiss. "How does China sound to you for a honeymoon?" he asked unevenly, his mouth against her temple.

She pulled back and looked at him. "China's fine with me." A gentle smile curved her lips. "I don't care where we go as long as we're together."

"Are you sure?" He paused. "I know how you value your career, your independence..."

For a moment, Courtney knew real fright. "Oh, Kace," she began, "don't you know that from this day forward you're first in my life? Now that I know what love is all about, do you honestly think I'd let anything take precedence over it?"

"Oh, Courtney, I love you," he told her, his voice thick with emotion. "And let's begin, right now, filling our shared moments with a lifetime of love."




LUCY GORDON

Island of Dreams



Unexpectedly, Jarvis opened his heart to Morag, and a marriage of convenience turned into a loving acceptance.



Morag Lewis pulled her coat more tightly round her. On Brannock, as on the other Scottish islands, the weather was windy and unpredictable until the year was well advanced, and today was only the last day of March. The rough wind pulled at Morag, whipping her copper hair round her face. Her heart would be in this lovely place till the end of her life.

She had left the island when she was eighteen to train as a nurse in Edinburgh, and she had remained at Edinburgh General for five years. Then Duncan Laidley, the owner of the island, had fallen ill. The island's doctor had told Duncan that he must either live on the mainland, near a hospital, or have a live-in nurse. Duncan had refused to budge from his home. So Morag had returned.

She had cared for Duncan for a year and knew her job was coming to an end. The old man grew weaker every day.

The ferry had docked now, and the passengers were leaving it. From the top of the harbour road her eyes were drawn to the last man off. He was tall—Morag guessed over six foot—and he moved with a swift, purposeful step. He ignored both the taxis and the cart and headed straight for the steep hill that climbed to the village. Then a bend in the road took him out of sight.

She headed for the antique shop. Flora Sinclair, its owner, was not an island girl, but a "foreigner" from Edinburgh who had visited Brannock one summer ten years ago and fallen in

love with a farmer. Flora was busy with a customer when Morag entered.

Morag plunged into her large bag and brought out something wrapped in soft cloth, which she unwrapped with great care. A small ivory figure came into view. Morag pulled off her coat and picked up the ivory figure again. It was beautiful, and she knew it had cost the old man a real pang to part with it. Brannock Castle had once contained many lovely antiques, but now they were dwindling fast.

The doorbell jangled and she looked up. It was the tall stranger from the boat who stepped inside. Close to, he confirmed all her first impressions. She was five foot six, but he towered over her. His shoulders were very broad and heavy with muscles.

His face might have been attractive but for the grim expression on it. His eyes raked her quickly, impersonally, before dismissing her, flicking instead over the ivory figure that she had set down on a low table as he entered. He came near and lifted the figure, handling it like someone who knew antiques.

"How the devil does this come to be here?" he said abruptly. His accent was English, possibly from London.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Never mind. How much? I'll pay whatever you're asking."

"I'm afraid that's not for sale," she said firmly, and reached out her hand for the figure.

He frowned, turning the figure over between his fingers without seeming to hear her. The frown darkened his face

still more, emphasising the hard line of his mouth.

She went on. "It's part of a private transaction—"

His eyes narrowed. "What kind of a private transaction?"

"I don't see that's any of your business."

To Morag's relief Flora came to her side. Her eyes widened when she saw the ivory figure in the man's hand.

"I'm afraid you can't buy that," she said at once.

The man sighed. "This is becoming monotonous. Is this, or is it not, an antique shop?"

Flora answered the man in a brisk voice that matched his own.

"It is. And I'm the owner. But I'm merely acting as broker between the seller and the buyer of that figure. If you want to acquire it, you can do so through—" She reeled off her father's name and the address of his Edinburgh shop. "I'll be pleased to tell him to expect a visit from you after I've delivered it tomorrow."

To Morag's relief the man placed the figure back on the table and took out a notebook and pencil. As he scribbled the address he said, without looking up, "Tell him to hold it for me. He won't get an offer better than mine."

He didn't wait for an answer, apparently assuming that his command was sufficient. Before departing, he cast a keen glance at Morag. It was the scrutiny of a man who wanted to commit her to memory.

"The cheek!" Morag exploded when the door had shut. "I hope your father prices it right out of his range."

"It's not likely," said Flora. "Something tells me *that* one will be able to afford whatever Father asks. It's worth a tidy amount. You can tell Himself not to worry."

Morag thanked her and took her leave. She gasped as the wind attacked her again the second she stepped outside, and she pulled her coat more firmly around her. Despite the cold, she had no qualms about the two-mile walk that she must make to Brannock Castle, which lay on the far side of the long, narrow island.

Much of the road home lay across a peat bog, where Morag could see that the cutting had already started. Arms were waved to her as she passed, and she waved back.

The land began to slope upwards. Seabirds wheeled and screamed overhead, for she was nearing Brannock Castle, which was set on top of a cliff. It was nearly two hundred years old.

Duncan was sitting in his wheelchair in the hall when Morag hurried through the front door. He was a small man of nearly eighty, shrunk by age and illness and with a transparent quality to his skin.

Morag told him about her visit to the shop. She made no mention of the man who had wanted to buy the figure, but she did emphasise that Flora expected to get a good price. He grunted.

"That's grand as far as it goes, but that won't be very far, I fear. There was a letter from Ian this morning—"

"Did your son say anything about coming to see you?"

Duncan snorted loudly. "He'll come when I'm in my box, not before. Then he'll drain the rest of you as he's drained me. And then he'll sell the place." He sighed. "Perhaps I should have sold it myself when I had the chance. But I knew only one man who wanted it, and I showed him the door. His name was Jarvis Dacre. He was going to turn my grandfather's wine cellar into a basement office, with a computer and God-knows-what-else, so that he could keep track of every-

thing that was happening in all his factories." Abruptly he drained his tea and held out the cup to her. "Put some whisky in there," he commanded.

"Duncan, I don't think—"

"Do as you're told! I don't pay you to think, but to keep that meddling doctor quiet so that I can stay in my home. And you needn't, any of you, think I'm done for. I'll not be leaving here till I've seen my friends safe. You can count on that."

DUNCAN LAIDLEY died three weeks later. He went to bed cheerfully one night and did not wake the next morning.

Morag cleared her things out of the room she had occupied at Brannock Castle, said goodbye to Kate, the housekeeper, and went back to the village. Her Aunt Kirsty and Uncle Angus owned the village pub, The Thistle, and this had been Morag's home since her parents had died in her fourth year. Her old room looked as it had the day she first went away, and she was happy to be in it again for a while.

A month passed. Morag heard from Edinburgh General that a sister's post would shortly become vacant. She made a trip to the city to attend an interview and was eagerly welcomed back by the hospital officials, who had been sorry to lose her. There were a few weeks still to go before she could take up her new post, but she returned to Brannock with the cheerful feeling that her future was happily settled. She wished she could say the same for the island.

She was in The Thistle one evening, pulling a pint for Dr. Tindall, when the door opened and Flora Sinclair came rushing in like a whirlwind.

"He's done it!" she exploded. "The rotten swine. Ian Laidley's sold Bran-

nock Island and never had the common decency to write and tell us himself!"

She held up a copy of *News & Around*, a weekly news magazine. "We've all been taken over by some huge industrial conglomerate." She was almost in tears of rage. "We belong to Dacre Industries," she said bitterly.

She began to read out odd passages from the article.

Dacre was thirty-seven and had started from nothing, turning himself into a multimillionaire in an astonishingly short time.

"What does he look like?" said Kirsty. "Is there a picture?"

"Ay, on the next page." Flora flicked the page over.

Everyone craned to see the large black-and-white picture of a harsh face with deep-set eyes.

"I'd not care to meet that one on a dark night," said Kirsty. "Did you ever see a face like that?"

"Ay!" said Flora and Morag with one voice. "We have!"

THREE WEEKS LATER, Morag was again packing for departure. She got all her things laid out on her bed and began to run through them methodically.

"Would you know what I did with my copy of *Cardiac Nursing*?" she asked Kirsty, who had come into the room bearing a cup of tea.

"You kept it at the Castle when you were nursing Himself," said Kirsty.

Morag groaned. "Oh, it must still be there. I'll have to get it."

"But how will you get in?" said Kirsty. "Kate is still on the mainland with her daughter."

Morag chuckled. The window of her bedroom at Brannock Castle had never closed properly. She could retrieve her

property without anyone knowing that she'd ever been there.

When it was dark she found her way easily to the house. She made her way to the shed, where she knew she would find a ladder.

The window yielded easily. She pulled it wide open and hoisted herself over the sill. She could make out the furniture in the moonlight.

She had reached the cabinet and was leaning down to open it when the noise of the window being pulled shut made her whirl round. A huge shape loomed between her and the light.

"I don't know who you are," she managed to say, "but you've got no right to be here."

"That," said a harsh voice, "was the last thing I expected you to be stupid enough to say."

At the sound of that voice she clutched the cabinet for support. She had heard it once before.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her round so that he could see her face in the moonlight.

"Just as I thought," Jarvis Dacre snapped. "The girl from the antique shop, doing a little more thieving."

She stared at him, aware that her jaw had dropped. "I climbed in that window to get back my own property. If I'd known you were here, I'd have knocked on the door."

He gave a short, angry laugh. "That's a little feeble."

"I'm telling the truth," she said wildly. "My name is Morag Lewis and I'm a nurse. I looked after Duncan because he had a bad heart, and when I left here I forgot to take my book on cardiac nursing."

"Where is the book?" he demanded.

"In my bedside cabinet."

He released her, and she darted to the bedside cabinet. Frantically she

reached into every corner, but the cabinet was empty. "It was here," she said desperately. "Kate must have moved it when she cleared up after I left."

"I don't like thieves." He had taken hold of her arm and was propelling her towards the door. He drew her downstairs and into Duncan's study. He snatched up the telephone receiver and seemed to become aware for the first time that there was no dial. While he hesitated, a voice spoke in his ear. Jessie Winnerton had piercing tones, and Morag had no difficulty in making out her words.

"What number can I get you, please?"

"The police station," said Jarvis Dacre, "and quickly."

There was an ominous pause. It meant that Jessie, who was "sensitive," had heard a voice she didn't recognise and disliked its tone.

Then Jessie's slightly acid voice was saying, "I'm afraid there's no reply from the police station."

Jarvis Dacre drew in a slow, exasperated breath. "That is surely impossible. There must be someone there."

"Ay, you'd think so," Jessie agreed in an affable manner that told Morag she was preparing to dig her heels in, "but he's not there, I can tell you that. Would you try again later, perhaps?"

Before he realised what she was doing, Morag snatched up the receiver. "Let me show you how it's done. Hallo, Jessie? I'm awful sorry to trouble you at this time of the night."

"Och, it's no matter," said Jessie, friendly now that she was dealing with a caller who paid her proper respect.

"Who's supposed to be on duty at the police station?"

"Sam Brodie. But he had to slip over to Creggan Farm awhile. That dog's been worrying their sheep again."

"Could you call Creggan Farm and see if Sergeant Brodie is still there?" said Morag. "And if he is, ask him to come over to the Castle. A hardened criminal has been found breaking in."

"A hardened criminal, you say? Who would that be?"

"Me, of course. Who else?" Morag put the receiver down and faced Dacre. "Creggan Farm is no distance. Sergeant Brodie should be here in about five minutes."

He regarded her through narrowed eyes. "Well, I'll be damned," he said slowly. "I've got to give you the prize for nerve. You should have gone into business, Miss Lewis. You'd probably have made a million by much the same methods as I did myself."

"I wonder if your methods are the kind I'd care to stoop to, Mr. Dacre," she said coolly.

His face hardened again. "I'm not taking that from a girl who's been robbing a sick old man of his treasures. The worst that's ever been said of me never included an accusation of *that* sort of behaviour. But I'm glad you said it. It's cured me of a momentary weakness I was beginning to feel. Now you can take what's coming to you."

A knock came at the front door a few minutes later. When Sam Brodie came inside, Morag smiled up at the man who had dandled her on his knee when she was a child.

"Now, what sort of game are you playing, lassie?" Sam said.

"I'm afraid," said Morag, "Mr. Dacre caught me climbing up a ladder to get into the window of my old bedroom."

"Now that was wrong of you," said Sam at once. "Suppose you'd slipped and fallen?"

"Do I take it that you know this young woman?" asked Dacre.

"Of course," said Sam, bewildered. "Everybody knows Morag. She kept Himself alive almost single-handed with her fine nursing."

"I came to get back my book on cardiac nursing," Morag said for Sam's benefit. "I go to Edinburgh tomorrow."

"You're away to that hospital to be a nurse again, aren't you?"

"I'm going to be a sister now. They've promoted me."

"Och, that's wonderful. I hadn't heard that. Congratulations, lassie. I'd have come and drunk your health in The Thistle tonight if I'd known—"

"When the two of you have finished," said Dacre, rigid with anger, "perhaps I could draw your attention back to the matter in hand?"

"I think you'd better clear my character, Sam," Morag prompted. "Mr. Dacre thinks I'm a thief because I popped into Flora's shop with one of Himself's ivory figures. Nothing will convince him that I'm not replenishing the stock by unorthodox methods."

"Don't talk so daft, lassie," Sam begged. "Take no notice, Mr. Dacre. Morag has her own sense of humour."

Morag tightened her quivering lips to stop herself laughing out loud and found that Dacre's hard, glittering eyes were fixed on her. She'd done the unforgivable, she realised. This man would not tolerate being made an object of mockery.

Sam turned to Dacre. "Sir, are you easier in your mind now that we've cleared up the identity of this desperado, or do you want me to arrest her and give her a night in the cells?"

"Since you vouch for her good character, that will not be necessary." He had recovered his poise, but Morag was not deceived. Beneath that smooth exterior, anger still vibrated.

"Now then, lassie, shall I walk you home?" Sam asked.

"I'd be obliged if you'd remain here, Miss Lewis," said Dacre at once. "Since you seem to be familiar with the house, I'd like you to show me where everything is. I can escort you home afterwards."

"I'd not put you to the trouble, sir," said Sam.

It was obvious that Jarvis Dacre wanted privacy to have a flaming row with her, and Sam was determined that he wasn't going to have it. But Morag wasn't afraid of Dacre.

"Thanks, Sam, but there's no need," she said. "There's nothing for me to be scared of."

"In that case, I'll be off home to my bed." He went out and closed the front door behind him.

WITH THE LIGHT on she had a better view of him. Dacre wore dark slacks and a white shirt that was open half-way down, revealing a deep chest thickly covered with black curly hair that stretched right up to the base of his throat. The sleeves were rolled back, exposing powerful tanned forearms on which the hair also grew luxuriantly.

"I walked right into it, didn't I?" he said. His tone wasn't unpleasant, but there was a look in his eyes that warned her he was far from reconciled to his defeat. "You set me up beautifully." He bit out the last words.

"No. You set yourself up. If you hadn't been so nasty to me, I'd have gone easier on you."

"Why didn't the operator tell me what she told you, by the way?" he asked.

"You offended her. Jessie doesn't mind leaving her bed to put through calls, but she does like appreciation."

"Leaving her bed?"

"Ay. The switchboard's in her room. Otherwise she might not hear the bell at night."

"I had no idea I'd find the phones still manually operated. That's something that'll have to be changed," he murmured almost to himself.

"You're planning to change a great deal on Brannock, aren't you, Mr. Dacre? If you don't like the place, why take it?" she said. "Why not leave it for someone who likes us as we are?"

He stood facing her now, his eyes fierce. "Did Ian Laidley like you as you are? He couldn't wait to get rid of Brannock, and for the highest price he could command. You may not like me, but in time you'll agree that I'm the best thing that could have happened to this island."

"I wonder if I shall?" she mused.

"You will. *I'll make you!*" he said in a curious voice of soft violence.

She shook her head. "You'll not make the islanders give you their hearts by pointing a gun at them."

He scowled. "Never mind the others. I think I should like the satisfaction of hearing you admit that I was good for Brannock."

"Perhaps I will—in about a hundred years." She laughed.

"Until you do, you and I have unfinished business."

She realised that he had come closer to her. One hand was behind her waist, pressing her gently against his big, powerful frame. She looked up to his dangerously close mouth and his eyes, which were so dark it was like looking into infinity.

"Don't you know," he said, his lips curving in a slight smile, "that the greatest insult a woman can offer a man is to say that she feels perfectly safe with him?"

His arms tightened as he spoke, and the hardness of his mouth on hers silenced her reply. She tried to twist away from him, but it was hard to remember to fight him when every teasing, licking movement of his tongue touched off fires that raced along her nerves to the farthest reaches of her body.

He had started out to teach her a lesson, but his body was caught in the same fever heat as her own, she realized. He released her lips and began to kiss the soft skin of her neck. She moaned and found that her hands were urgently caressing his back.

"I was a fool," he murmured huskily in her ear. "Feel what you're doing to me—it's more than I can stand—"

He tried to capture her mouth again, but she twisted her head sharply away. She wanted him passionately, but stronger than desire was fear. She turned her back and stood with a hand over her eyes, longing to be back in his arms but determined to resist the temptation.

She dropped her hand and looked up at him. There was no need to tell him why she'd broken away. She could see in his eyes that he'd guessed.

"What happens now?" he said. "It's up to you."

She pulled herself together. "Nothing happens—except that I go home."

"And then?" His voice was tense.

"I don't know what your future is, but mine is as a ward sister in the Edinburgh General, a post I leave to take up tomorrow. I doubt our paths will cross again."

She turned away, but he seized her arm and pulled her round to face him. "Do you think I couldn't make them?"

She looked up at him with angry yes. "Do you think force will serve you this time?"

Their eyes held for a long, blazing moment. Then she felt him begin to draw her closer, and she put out a hand to ward him off. But at the last moment he stopped, held rigid by a high-pitched wailing that sounded as though it came from a distant siren.

"In pity's name where does that devilish sound come from?" he demanded.

She wrenched herself free from his grasp and seized up her jacket.

"It comes from Creggan Farm, and it means there's an emergency," she said, shrugging the garment on. "Someone has to be rushed off the island in an air ambulance. The pilot has to land in one of the fields of Creggan Farm. We all turn out and help shoo the cattle into the next field. Then we set up landing lights."

"Naturally," he said faintly. "This is something I'm determined to see."

She was out of the door almost before he finished speaking. He took up a jacket and caught up with her.

Morag didn't stop until she reached Martha Creggan, the farmer's wife.

"Gather some bottles, lassie," the woman called, "and hurry away with them."

They joined the islanders, stretched out in two lines, placing bottles to mark the edges of the landing strip. The first match flared, then another, and another, until at last every taper was burning, giving a wide path for the plane from Edinburgh to land in.

Almost immediately the Islander could be seen, circling the runway, positioning itself exactly midway between the lines of milk bottles with their glowing tapers, descending, coming slowly in to land.

The plane had come to a halt close to them, and its lights played on Morag's face. The wind had whipped her hair round her cheeks, and her eyes

were shining. Jarvis took a deep breath. The flames from the tapers burned in her eyes, and she seemed to stand out like a jewel in the darkness.

She stood there, her eyes fixed on the plane till it had taxied away and taken off with its patient. All around them the crowd was moving, collecting up the bottles, extinguishing the lights, taking them back to Martha to be put away until next time.

"Well," Morag said, "I'll be bidding you good night, Mr. Dacre."

He seemed to come out of a dream and speak with an effort. "I'll walk you to your home," he said.

"You will not." Her eyes twinkled. "I'll not make the same mistake twice."

He winced as though she had struck him. "Don't laugh at me, Morag," he said harshly.

Amusement bubbled up to her lips, but it died there. "All right," she said softly, "I'll just bid you good night."

She hurried away.

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SHE'D BEEN BACK at work for two weeks now. Her new duties took a great deal out of her, but she found them satisfying.

Morag perched herself on the edge of her bed and began to rip open the parcel that had come for her from Brannock. She found herself holding her copy of *Cardiac Nursing*.

Then she saw an envelope. She tore it open and read.

I found this in the library.

Be good enough to accept my apologies for my unjust accusations. I have to be in London for a fortnight, but when I return I shall stop overnight in Edinburgh. Please let me know when

you are likely to be off duty, so that I can arrange to be available to take you to dinner.

Yours sincerely,
Jarvis Dacre

She read the letter again. In just such terms must Jarvis Dacre have invited fellow tycoons to a working lunch. But it was no way to entice a woman.

Before she went to bed she sat down and wrote him a note, as formal as his own, telling him that she was grateful for the return of her book but that there was no necessity for him to take her to dinner.

TWO WEEKS passed. Kate wrote to say that the following weekend was the date set for the *reiteach* of Sally Fergusson and Murdo Strachan, and could Morag get away? A *reiteach* was an engagement party, and Sally was a dear friend of hers, so Morag wrote to her aunt, giving her travel details.

Saturday she made Edinburgh Airport in good time. It was a fine, warm summer day, and she was looking forward to the weekend.

"Morag!"

The deep, beautiful voice behind her caused her to jump. She looked round. Even in those prosaic surroundings Jarvis Dacre was overpowering.

"I'm glad I bumped into you," he said, "because now you can travel home with me. My helicopter's here."

"But—I have a seat on the plane."

"The three o'clock is a very popular flight. There's a queue of people at the desk hoping desperately for returned tickets. By coming with me you'll enable one of them to get a seat on the plane."

He had a point. "It would be a real treat to be able to get there direct and

not have to take the ferry," she said at last.

THE HELICOPTER was nearing the village.

"There's a piece of open land," said Jarvis. "I'll set you down there, and you won't have far to walk."

A bump and they had landed. Jarvis opened the door and got out first, reaching up to help her down.

"I'll see you at the *reiteach* tonight," he said. "Will you promise me the first dance?"

"Of course," she said. It would have been impossible to refuse.

When the helicopter whirled away, Morag turned to face the interested crowd that had gathered round her.

"Well," said Kirsty, "I suppose there *may* have been a bigger sensation round here in the last fifty years, but I can't recall it."

"And he demanded the first dance," said Uncle Angus, who had been standing close enough to hear what was said. "But I thought you could have answered him a little more enthusiastically, lassie."

"I said yes, didn't I?" Morag protested.

"Ay, but you made it sound like a duty. That's no way to catch a fish."

"Angus," she said indignantly, "will you stop your nonsense? Kirsty, make him behave!"

But even Kirsty failed her this time. "It would be a fine thing for us all," she said wistfully.

Morag's cheeks flamed.

BECAUSE THE weather was kind, the *reiteach* took place on the open land near where Morag had landed. Lonnie Rannach would play the fiddle all night, fingers never tiring. Morag noticed that Lonnie had a livid black eye.

"It was Mr. Cronin," said Sally Fergusson. "He's Jarvis Dacre's factor. He's been going round to all the tenants 'discussing' their tenancies. He told several people that the rents were 'uneconomic.' He nearly had a fit when Lonnie told him he didn't pay any rent at all."

"I told him it was a gentleman's agreement between me and Himself," Lonnie put in indignantly. "He thought I was talking about that one at the Castle now. I told him Jarvis Dacre would never be Himself if he stayed here a hundred years."

"You see how it is," Sally said, distressed. "How can we pay what Mr. Cronin calls 'economic rents'?"

The music started, and at once the dancing area was crowded. Morag looked round. She refused all partners, remembering her promise to Jarvis.

Suddenly a tall, black-haired man had come to stand on the edge of the circle. His eyes were brilliant, and they scanned the crowd.

Morag could see how those closest to Jarvis Dacre had stopped what they were doing to stare at him. She could tell that he knew of the politely veiled coolness that everyone felt towards him and, incredible though it might seem, he minded desperately.

His eyes were on her as she walked towards him. She saw the slight sag of relief in his shoulders, which no one else would have noticed. As she neared him she stretched out her hands in welcome.

His words came awkwardly. "Am I too late for my dance?"

"No."

Lonnie struck up the sweet, gentle refrain of a waltz, and Jarvis Dacre took her into his arms.

"I asked you to have dinner with me, and you sent me a refusal so cold

it almost froze my hands on the paper."

"You didn't really want to take me," she protested.

"After what there was between us, you thought I didn't want to see you?"

"But that . . . that was so long ago. I thought you'd forgotten—"

"I shall never forget," he said simply. "And nor will you."

It would be useless to deny it. With her body pressed against his, her blood sang from the close contact. He wanted her. And an instinct born deep in her newly wakened senses told her that he had wanted her throughout every moment of the weeks they had spent apart.

MORAG HAD a confused impression of having been hurried away from the *reiteach*, followed by the curious eyes of the other guests. She knew what a sensation they must have created, but she was beyond caring.

He drove like a madman along the moonlit roads, until at last she saw the outline of Brannock Castle. Jarvis had screeched to an abrupt halt outside his own front door. He sat there gripping the wheel.

"I suppose I've offended everybody by rushing off like that," he said.

"I doubt it," she tried to reassure him. "They won't have expected you to make more than a formal appearance—"

"Yes, that's just it," he broke in with muted savagery. "They don't expect me to stay, and they don't want me to. They hate me," he brooded.

"Well, do you care about a bunch of Scottish rustics? If you don't succeed on Brannock, you can always buy up another island and try again."

He shook his head. "Never!" he said. "It has to be Brannock." He slammed a hand on the wheel.

"Why, Jarvis?" she said urgently.

Instead of answering, he helped her out of the car and took her hand. "Do you know your way down this path?" he said.

"Ay, I've trod it many times. But why?"

"Just follow me, and you'll see."

At the bottom the sand was firm. He drew her along the rock wall to where some large stones provided a natural seat.

"You might say I bought Brannock in order to own this beach." He fell silent for a moment. At last he said, as if the words were forced from him, "My mother was a Brannock girl. She fell in love with a man from London, a tourist." His voice was harsh. "He went home leaving her pregnant. When she caught up with him, he called her names and threw her out."

Unconsciously, he had taken hold of Morag's hand.

"My mother never came back here. She assumed the name of Dacre and passed as a widow. She talked about this beach, how beautiful it was. She died when I was seventeen, leaving me fifty pounds. I hitchhiked and got the ferry to Brannock. I found the beach without any difficulty, and for the first time in my life I felt I belonged somewhere."

He was silent for a long time.

"And then," he said at last, "Duncan Laidley came storming down the cliff path and told me to get the hell off his beach. He picked up some stones and began to hurl them at me. I'd have killed him if I could for what he'd done to me. I don't mean a few stones—"

"I know," she said gently, "he'd ruined everything."

He made an almost imperceptible movement. "He called the police. I spent the night in the cells and was escorted off the island next morning. And I promised myself that somehow I'd get enough money to buy this place, and then no one would ever be able to turn me off again.

"I went to night school and took business courses and smashed my way to the top.

"I came here five years ago, hoping to buy the place. Laidley wouldn't even consider selling. But I had the satisfaction of knowing that he didn't recognise me from our last meeting. How could he? I hardly recognised myself, I'd changed so much."

"But you got what you wanted," she said.

For the first time he smiled at her. "The thing I'd forgotten in all those years of dreaming was the people. I never thought of them rejecting me." He raised his head as though making a discovery. "It's funny—you wouldn't believe how much that hurts."

"It could be different," she urged. "If they know you're one of them—if you tell them everything you've told me."

"No!" The word seemed to explode from him like a gunshot. "They must never know about that. Try to understand—they must take me as I am."

"Then why not do the same for the slanders? If people are hostile, it's because you've made it so plain that you're a threat to everything we hold dear. Of course Brannock needs bringing up to date. It's only the way you're going about it that's wrong."

He looked at her curiously. "What would you do if you were me?"

"There are five farms lying idle on Brannock right now because there's no one to farm them. I'd give the first two

years rent free, and I'd make interest-free loans to buy stock and farm machinery. I'd tell folks they can stop worrying about their rents. And I'd tell Lonnie he can stay where he is on the same terms as before."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I'd build a cottage hospital so that women wouldn't have to go away to Edinburgh to have their bairns."

He got up and came to stand in front of her, taking her by the shoulders. Through the hard grip of his fingers she could feel him shaking.

"It means a lot to you, doesn't it?" he said intently.

"It's the most beautiful place in the world."

His eyes glinted curiously. "I'll do everything you want."

She laughed. "You're quite mad. You don't mean it."

"I mean every word. I want something from you which will more than repay me for what I'm giving. If you marry me and have my children here on Brannock, they'll accept me. I shall belong."

"It's impossible!" she said violently. "We've only met twice. We don't love each other. There's nothing between us—"

"That is untrue, and you know it. You have not forgotten our last meeting any more than I have. You remember that I desire you, and you're too honest to deny that you desire me."

She sighed and dropped her head into her hands, suddenly weary. Memories came and went—Sally Ferguson, telling her troubles, knowing that Morag was the one person who could help; Lonnie, complaining about the factor; the strange way everyone looked at her. They had all seen this coming, and they were all depending on her. They were her old friends, the people she loved. Could she let them

down now that she held their fate in her hands?

"Tell me one thing," she said, turning to face him. "Was it an accident that we met at Edinburgh Airport this afternoon?"

"Of course not," he said impatiently. "I don't leave important matters to chance. I knew from Kate what plane you were booked on."

"You've thrown a net over me, haven't you?" she cried passionately. "And you think I can't get away."

She turned from him, but he stopped her with an arm that was like a steel band round her waist. He pulled her towards him, and his voice rasped with a passion that she had heard once before.

"You have belonged to me since the moment I first held you in my arms," he said.

She made one last effort to deny herself to him, but he kissed her with terrifying skill. She recognised something in him too—a desperation that amounted almost to pleading.

"Jarvis," she said at last in a voice that she barely recognised as her own. "I'll marry you."

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SHE WAS embarrassed a week later to have to go into the hospital's head office and explain that she was leaving again so soon after being taken back, but the superintendent listened with enthusiasm as Morag outlined the plans for the island's future.

"I really feel I can be more use there than here—" Morag tried to say, but the superintendent broke in.

"My dear, if they're really going to build a cottage hospital on Brannock, I'd *rather* you were there. You'd be amazed how many hospitals are designed and built by idiots who know

nothing about how hospitals work. You'll be able to stop them making stupid mistakes, I dare say."

That was Morag's own feeling. She did not regard herself as leaving work but as changing one job for another. Making sure that things went well on the island was going to be a full-time occupation.

THREE WEEKS LATER she became Jarvis's wife in the big, round fifteenth-century kirk, whose spire dominated the village.

Her headdress, as befitted an island bride, was made of small white flowers that had been picked in the wild. Her bouquet was white roses interspersed with myrtle, the symbol of life, union and rebirth.

Pastor Dunbray led them down the steps to a large stone pillar into which another, much older bit of stone had been embedded. Part of it protruded just above head level, and into this was cut a large hole.

Every neck in the kirk craned towards them, for although the rumour had gone round that the new owner meant to be married in the old way, it had been met with general incredulity. But now, fascinated and only half believing, they saw Jarvis Dacre pass his left hand through the hole in the stone and take hold of his bride's right hand.

Pastor Dunbray spoke with a raised voice, using the words of the old dialect.

On the previous day Morag had translated the words to Jarvis. She wondered if he shared her sense of being caught up in an implacable destiny from which there was no turning back. The solemn words underlined it. Whatever the future held, they said, their oaths had made them one, to endure together all their lives.

As they walked out of the kirk door, it was the piercing sweet tones of Lonnie Rannach's fiddle that met them. The old man turned and began to lead the way, playing a lively jig and occasionally capering to the music in a way that belied his years. They swung away from the kirk towards the bridge. Morag looked up and found her husband watching her face with a smile in his dark eyes that made her heart turn over.

"Am I doing this right?" he said softly.

"You're doing fine," she assured him. "Keep your eyes on me till we get over the bridge. Then, as legend goes, you'll be safe from the kelpies, and you can look away."

But perhaps he didn't understand her, for when the bridge was passed his gaze remained on her face. He seemed transfixed by the faint flush on her cheeks, which glowed in peachy softness against the white of her veil.

Later that night, when it was dark and folk were wandering happily home to their beds, it was said by many that the queen of the kelpies could have shouted herself hoarse. She'd not have got Jarvis Dacre away from his bride.

WHEN HE CARRIED her over the threshold of the castle, she blushed. When they were inside the bedroom, he kicked the door to and set her on her feet. Then his mouth was on hers, and he was kissing her hungrily. There was passion in it, but also reassurance, so that the reckless speed at which she was swept along became less alarming.

She had often tried to imagine him naked. Now she could see all of his beautiful body. He radiated power in every line, from the deep chest with its

covering of hair to the lean hips and long thighs.

His hands were touching her naked body with caressing, intimate movements. She twisted her head violently, as a fork of fire went through her.

She felt him part her legs and move between them, possessing her quickly, so that she gasped at the sharp pain that briefly invaded her. But then it became suddenly easy, as though Jarvis were really a part of her. The piercing sweetness of his movements inside her compelled her into his rhythm until at last she let herself fall into the void. She called his name, and when the tremors that shook her were finally stilled, she found that he had never let her go, and his arms had held her safe all the time.

AS A LOVER he was ferocious and tender by turns. Sometimes she could almost believe that their passionate desire for each other was a strong enough basis for marriage. Almost—but not quite. She knew that she did not have his love. And she wanted it. For, after three weeks, she could no longer blind herself to the fact that she had fallen deeply in love with him.

Even on their honeymoon, Jarvis Dacre had never entirely stopped being a businessman. Barbados was five hours behind London, and he would often spend the early hours of the evening in nonstop telephone calls to colleagues, rivals or Willis Rackham, his personal assistant. Morag would spend these hours dozing until it was time to get up and prepare for dinner, followed by a night of Jarvis's skillful loving. Once Jarvis had said to her, "I'd half expected you to complain about the time I have to spend working, but you've adjusted to being a

businessman's wife remarkably quickly."

"Oh, I'm very grateful to Mr. Rackham and the others," she murmured from the bed where she had been napping. "But for them, I doubt I'd get any sleep *at all*."

He had laughed and dropped his head to kiss her tousled hair.

*

IN THE CAR on their way to the home of Sally and Paul Kendal in the heart of London, Jarvis said abruptly, "There's something I ought to tell you. You'll meet a woman called Denise Blenham at the dinner party tonight. She's just come back from New York, where's she's been having a very costly holiday—at my expense." He spoke without looking at her, keeping his eyes on the traffic. "It was partly a goodbye present," Jarvis went on. "I knew that if she was in New York, Blair Hawkins would follow her, at least for a while. I felt safer with him out of London. For years we've been trying to stab each other in the back because London isn't big enough to hold both of us."

Misinterpreting her silence, he went on impatiently, "I've broken my old ties, and the breaks are final. If anyone tries to tell you otherwise, don't believe them."

The dismay that possessed her was not for Jarvis's casual admission that Denise had been his mistress. It was for the cold-blooded way he had behaved towards her. Suppose the day ever came when he felt that Morag's own usefulness was at an end!

And there was another thing that dismayed her almost as much. "Jarvis, if you're so nervous about leaving Blair Hawkins a free hand in London, how can you get away to Brannock? I

thought we were going to spend at least half our lives up there."

"We are. That's why the fight's coming to a head now. I have to render him ineffective."

Jarvis and Morag arrived late, and dinner was served almost at once. Morag found herself sitting next to her host. She liked Paul Kendal at once.

"Who's that man staring at me as if he can't make up his mind whether I'm fish or fowl?" she asked over dessert.

"That's Blair Hawkins."

"So that's him," she said slowly, in a tone that made Paul look at her sharply.

"Jarvis has told you about him then?" he said.

"Only that they're trying to cut each other's throats."

"That's one way of putting it," said Paul, speaking quietly under the din of chattering guests. "But Jarvis has ethics. Hawkins has none. He goes straight for the jugular. Watch out for him, Morag. You may find yourself having to care for Jarvis through a bad patch."

A cold hand clutched at her. "But why?" she said.

Paul gave a grimace.

"A few months ago I thought Jarvis was poised to wipe Hawkins off the face of the earth, but then—" He stopped, seemingly embarrassed. "Have a little more wine," he said.

"What happened a few months ago?" she demanded.

"You of all people ask that?"

"You mean it was Brannock?"

"Of course. The island cost him over a million, and it's likely to cost him more by the time he's finished making changes. That's blown quite a hole in his reserves."

A chill of fear had crept over her, though whether she feared for her

husband or her beloved home, she could not say.

She and Paul made small talk until dinner was over, and later she found herself facing Blair Hawkins.

Hawkins said in a soft, caressing voice, "Everyone wants to meet the girl who achieved the miracle. And when they've met you, my dear Mrs. Dacre, they go away and lay their bets."

"You mean they're betting on how long the marriage will last?" she said, challenging him.

"Precisely. How astute you are."

"Well, let me give you the best investment advice you'll ever get. Put your money on 'till death us do part,' Mr. Hawkins. It's not a risk, it's a certainty."

He stared at Morag. An alert look came into his eyes as she excused herself.

Morag slipped upstairs to where the coats were laid and where she could examine her appearance. Denise Blenheim followed her in.

"Don't fool yourself that you can hold his interest. When the moment comes, don't antagonise Jarvis by trying to hang on. Just get the best payoff you can," she said.

Morag looked her straight in the eyes, her smile as cold and steely as Denise's. "Well, payoffs come in many different forms, don't they?" she said. "Including, so I've heard, trips to New York."

Morag had seized up her coat and whisked herself out of the door before the other woman could recover from her shock. She was amazed at herself.

WHEN MORAG HAD first seen Jarvis's beautiful London home, in the heart of Mayfair, she had loved it. It was her first experience with sumptuous liv-

ing, and at first she revelled in it. But gradually it palled. Having servants embarrassed her slightly. Eventually Morag was confronted by a boredom that buying another new dress would not help. She longed for Brannock. Autumn had come, and the island would be at its loveliest.

So when Willis Rackham, Jarvis's personal assistant, telephoned her to say that he was calling on her with the amended plans for the hospital, she breathed a sigh of relief that at last things were starting to happen.

At the same time, she was puzzled. That he should take time off to bring her the plans himself, rather than send a messenger, was very strange. But it soon became plain that he had an object in view.

"This looks a great deal better," said Morag, as she flicked through the pages he handed her.

"And a great deal more expensive," said Rackham in a quiet, cold voice. "It was bad enough when he spent a fortune buying that white elephant. Now he's pouring money into it hand over fist. He's letting the farms at giveaway prices—"

"Do you seriously think the rent of a few out-of-the-way acres makes any difference one way or another to a man having a boardroom battle with Blair Hawkins? They'll be fighting in millions."

It was a shot in the dark.

"If you know about the Hawkins battle, then I'm amazed that I have to explain to you why Mr. Dacre needs every penny," said Rackham in a harsh voice.

Morag held her breath. She had no intention of letting Rackham suspect how little she knew.

Her gamble paid off, because after a moment he went on, "I know you're new to business, but stock dumping

isn't a hard thing to understand. Surely you can see that it would be fatal for Mr. Dacre to go into this with his hands tied by too many other obligations."

"Yes," said Morag, hardly knowing what she said. There was a roaring in her ears, and she felt dizzy. She knew she must get rid of this man. "You've said what you came to say, Mr. Rackham, and I think you'd better go now."

Morag made no effort to show him to the door. She was incapable of movement.

JARVIS FOUND HER upstairs, seated at her dressing table, a pensive look in her eyes. He bent and dropped a kiss on her neck. His eyes fell on the hospital plans.

"Ah, good! Do they meet with your approval?"

"Yes, they're fine. Mr. Rackham brought them."

Jarvis made a sound of impatience. "So that's where he was when I wanted him. It's not like him to be gallant at the expense of work."

"He wasn't being gallant. He wanted to get me to abandon the projects for Brannock. He said they were ruining you."

"Damn his eyes! It's lucky he's not here now." Jarvis's face was hard with anger. "I made you certain promises, and I'm keeping them."

She jumped up, banging her hand on the dressing table. "If I'm doing you damage, I want to know. I want us to talk about it and—"

"Look..." He passed a hand tiredly in front of his eyes. "Morag, there'd be no point in my discussing business with you, because you wouldn't understand."

"I understand stock dumping," she said.

There was silence.

"Rackham *has* been opening his mouth, hasn't he?" said Jarvis grimly after a while.

"I let him think I knew a bit more about the Hawkins battle than I did."

"I've been buying Hawkins Enterprises for some time. I may as well tell you. If I put all my shares on the market in one go, the other investors will take fright and do the same. The price will crash. Then I'll buy back my own shares and as many as I can of the others at the lowest price to gain control of the company."

She faced him. "It's unscrupulous," she said flatly. "Because of what it does to the little people. You'll end up with a profit, but they'll see their life savings reduced to nothing."

"Morag," he said at last. "Shares are speculation, risk. People who don't want to take risks should put their money in a building society." He gave her a bitter smile. "You told me the night we met that 'my methods' weren't something you'd stoop to, so you obviously knew I was pretty black."

"But I didn't know..." she whispered through the tears that were beginning to pour down her cheeks. "Jarvis, listen to me, please," she begged. "I know you think Brannock is the only thing I care about, but it isn't true. I care about you, and the kind of man you are. I can't just look away and say that nothing else matters as long as there's money to spend on Brannock."

"Can't you?" He took a step back and gave her a long cynical gaze. "If you can sell yourself to the devil for the place, why should you mind if I do the same, in my own way?"

"But you're turning into a monster," she cried passionately. "It has to be my concern when I see that happening to the man I married."

"You didn't marry a man," he said brutally. "You married a bank account labelled 'Jarvis Dacre—Brannock, for the use of.'"

"That may be all our marriage is to you," she cried, "but not to me. I want to love you as any wife wants to love her husband. But if you do this horrible thing, *I won't be able to endure the sight of you.*"

He stared at her in total silence for a long moment. Then he went to the telephone by the bed. He dialled a number, and after a few moments he barked, "I shall need you tomorrow. You're taking Mrs. Dacre to Brannock. Be ready to leave at ten a.m."

He put down the receiver and regarded her with the hard eyes of a stranger. "Now you won't have to endure the sight of me," he said, and walked out.

*

AFTERWARDS Morag remembered the following weeks as among the most miserable, and yet the most satisfying, of her life.

There was delight in seeing how her beloved home was flourishing. Jarvis had kept his word to the letter. The vacant farms would soon be taken up. The new factor told Morag that he had more applicants than he could handle.

Lonnie Rannach had been allowed to stay in his croft, undisturbed, rent free. Morag knew that the islanders would regard Jarvis's treatment of Lonnie as a kind of yardstick. Men and machinery were already on Brannock working on the airstrip. The site for the hospital was also being cleared. The

whole island buzzed with new life and hope, and she thrilled to it.

None of her friends knew of her wretchedness. Her story that she had returned to supervise the changes while Jarvis was detained on business in London was accepted. And if Kate noticed that Morag and her husband never spoke on the telephone, she kept her own counsel.

Morag realised now that she had been deluding herself in hoping that they might have a true marriage. Endlessly, she heard in her brain the terrible words, "*You married a bank account labelled 'Jarvis Dacre—Brannock, for the use of.'*"

She could see now how naive she had been to imagine that she would come to terms easily with Jarvis's world. The moment she opposed Jarvis he had banished her.

At night she longed for him. She would toss and turn for long desolate hours and finally cry herself to sleep.

Every day she scanned the money pages of the newspapers to see if shares in Hawkins Enterprises had started to sink. But their value held, and the tension of waiting for something to happen became almost unbearable.

One day she opened the paper to find Jarvis's face staring up at her. The shock was so great that she almost dropped the paper. When she had recovered, she realized that Hawkins was also pictured, over a headline "*Dacre Commences Battle with an Offer Hawkins Can't Refuse.*"

Forcing herself to keep steady, she turned to the shares column and sought out Hawkins's price. She had to read it three times before she could take in what she was reading.

The price had risen. Only by a fraction, but it had risen.

She turned back swiftly to the main story and began to read. It took her a

while to understand the intricacies, but at last she took it in. Jarvis had not dumped his stock. He was engaged in a straightforward out-in-the-open takeover bid.

The relief was so great that she began to shake. The darkness that had clouded her life was gone in one unbelievably swift movement. Weeping tears of joy, she forced herself to read it again. She knew a small pang of fear as she realised that Jarvis might lose this battle. By fighting honourably he had left himself—and her, and Brannock—vulnerable. But for the moment that fear was only a tiny blot on her happiness.

For a week she tried to follow what was going on, but with little success. She couldn't even tell whether he was winning. Finally, it was over. Jarvis would be all right. He'd got the control he wanted.

She stared at the phone for a long moment, wondering if she dared to phone him. She put out her hand, then let it fall. After a moment she strode out impatiently. The thought of spending the evening wandering around the Castle like a forlorn ghost on the off chance that Jarvis would ring was intolerable. And it would almost certainly be a futile wait. Jarvis could not endure the thought of being overheard by Jessie.

She was determined to enjoy the moment of happiness that had been granted her. It was possible now to believe that her marriage still had a future. Jarvis was still the man she loved, a man whose decent instincts had prevailed.

"Kate," she called from the hall, "if Jarvis rings, tell him to call me at The Thistle, please. I'll be there all evening."

Kate emerged from the kitchen. "Yes, madam."

"*Kate, for the love of heaven!*" Morag exploded. She checked herself at once and went on in a quieter tone. "Please stop calling me madam. It embarrasses me. I'm Morag."

"Och ay," said the old woman. "It's just that with you being Herself—"

"And Jarvis—is he Himself?" said Morag eagerly.

Kate looked uncomfortable. "That'll maybe take a wee bit of time," she said.

"After all he's done for the island—"

"It was yourself did those things, and everyone knows it. He'll become one of us, lassie, in time, in his own way."

The evening was a slight disappointment. She had expected to find solace in The Thistle among her old friends, but as they crowded round her she found herself seeing them in a new light. They were safe, although they didn't know they'd ever been in danger. Jarvis had protected them, but there wasn't one person there who regretted his absence.

When she went home, there had been no call from Jarvis. Disappointed, she threw herself into bed.

In the morning she could contain her impatience no longer and called Jarvis's London number. But there was no reply from the house.

"Look," said Kate, exasperated beyond bearing by Morag's wandering in and out of the kitchen, "why not take a swim? If he calls I can wave to you from the top of the cliff."

Dispiritedly, Morag agreed. After the excitement of yesterday, she was experiencing a sense of anticlimax. She didn't know where they went from there.

She began to rummage through the wardrobes to find the things she needed. Just as she was about to push

the second one shut she stopped. Several small items fluttered out. There was the formal, chilly note she had written him from Edinburgh, refusing his dinner invitation. There was a dried spray from her wedding headdress and a strand or two of her own copper hair.

She sat immobile, stricken by the pathetic tokens that spoke silently of feelings her husband dared not admit.

Jarvis loved her. She could no longer doubt it. Nothing else could explain why he, the most unsentimental man in the world, had preserved these little mementos of her. Now she discovered that he had been reaching longing hands towards her all the time—and she had never seen them. He loved her. He might never find the words to tell her of his feelings, but they would not change.

Quietly, she put the things back as she had found them. Jarvis must not know that she had surprised his secret.

She packed her things for the swim and hurried to the beach. The water was cold enough to make her gasp as she plunged in. She swam far out to sea then she turned and trod water, studying Brannock from this new perspective. The sun was in her eyes, but she had the impression of movement at the top of the cliff. She squinted, and the movement resolved itself into one man, in a white shirt and black trousers, starting to run down the cliff path.

Her heart stopped. She began to swim towards the shore with swift urgent strokes.

She heard him call her name, and something in its frantic note told her that he thought she was in danger.

"It's all right," she called back.

In another moment she was pressed against him, his mouth on hers in the kiss she had dreamed of ever since they

had parted. His muscles moving beneath her hands thrilled her.

They began to hurry up the cliff path. She felt the bass growl of his laughter against her skin. "We've made love a *million* times in the last few weeks—all night and every night, but then I'd wake, and you weren't there, and I'd want to smash something. You owe me all those lovings."

Once inside, they stripped off and plunged into a hot bath, rubbing each other down to get rid of the last of the cold. Then Jarvis locked the door, took her back to bed and made love to her as if it were the first time again. Afterwards, lying drowsily in his arms, she chuckled suddenly and said, "It wasn't my doing that we were apart, Jarvis."

He was silent for a moment. Then he got up and rummaged in his bag, producing a copy of the paper. He handed it to her, open at the financial pages.

"I've been following the pages every day," she said. "I didn't take it all in, but I knew days ago that you didn't dump your stock. Thank you, Jarvis."

He shrugged, and a curt note came into his voice. "Don't thank me. I did it for sound practical reasons."

"But you've left yourself worse off. You're in the hands of the banks."

"Yes, but they're reputable banks, not fly-by-night organisations. There's nothing to fear from them. Brannock's safe. It'll take time, but I'll pay back all I owe."

"But wouldn't it still have been easier to do it by stock dumping?"

"In the long term, every man has to turn to the banks. Decent banks don't like being associated with sharks. Acting like a shark now could have cost me dearly later on."

"I see," she said, with a little smile that he did not see. "It was just good business, then?"

"Just good business," he confirmed. "Now, what's *that* for?"

"Nothing. I can kiss you if I want to, can't I?"

LATE AUTUMN was unexpectedly mild. Brannock had flowered into a riot of mellow colours that mirrored Morag's feelings. Jarvis was spending much of his time on the island, supervising the installation of equipment that turned the Castle into a modern communications centre under its weathered exterior.

The airstrip was completed quickly, and by mid-November there were daily flights to the mainland. Jarvis's own Learjet was flown in by a young pilot whom Morag immediately liked. He confided to her that he spent much of his time feeling useless, though, as Jarvis liked to fly the plane himself.

The hospital site had been cleared, and all the machinery and materials moved in. Digging started on the foundations. With luck, and the kind of speedy work Jarvis seemed able to command, she could hope for the hospital to be ready by the following autumn.

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WINTER SET IN. The cold had a bitter quality, encouraging folk to congregate in The Thistle, where there was warmth and light and good Scotch whisky to comfort the heart.

Everyone gave Jarvis a friendly greeting, yet still there was an air of constraint. There was none of the cheerful, half-disrespectful acceptance that they had given Duncan without thinking.

Once, lying in the darkness, her head on Jarvis's shoulder, listening to the deep, slow beat of his heart, Morag heard him say suddenly, "Never in a

hundred years. I guess Lonnie Ranach was right after all."

Her heart sank. It was so unlike him to accept defeat.

Halfway through December they flew to London to embark on a round of Christmas entertaining. They spent Christmas in the city and returned to Brannock afterwards for the big Scottish celebration of Hogmanay.

In the night the wind gained strength. A gale lashed the house mercilessly. Rain started and was falling in sheets. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but water and bleak grey-ness.

But inside, the Castle was alive with the big Hogmanay party that was always given in the Castle on New Year's Eve.

The party seemed to take place over most of the house at once and grew more boisterous until suddenly Lonnie's flying fingers stopped on the violin, and he held up his hand. Everyone fell silent to hear what he had heard—the first chimes of midnight from the great grandfather clock in the hall. As the last note sounded, the Castle was shaken by an earsplitting yell, champagne fizzed from a dozen bottles and Morag found her husband's eyes on hers. She knew he was sharing her own thoughts—that this year would see the fulfillment or the deaths of all his hopes.

In the early hours folk began to depart. Some, as Morag predicted, had curled up and happily passed out. Even those who were relatively sober swayed back and forth across the road, buffeted by the mad winds that swept across the island. Morag stood shivering in the doorway, waving to the last of them, then turned back into the warmth with relief.

"I've just finished counting," said Jarvis, emerging from the study.

There are twenty still here. Is that normal?"

"It's more than last year," chuckled Morag, taking his arm. "You're making a good impression. When people camp out in your home on Brannock, it's a great compliment."

He grinned and would have said something, but they were interrupted by a violent banging on the front door. Morag pulled it open and found herself facing one of her neighbours, war-streaming all down him and a look of agitation on his face.

"Call the ambulance quickly, Morag," he said urgently. "Lonnie's had a serious accident. He took the shortcut home across Creggan Farm, tried to get over a wall and landed on some sort of machinery."

Morag relayed the details to Ambulance Control in Edinburgh, then she dashed upstairs to change out of her evening dress into jeans and a sweater. Undressing anorak over everything, he ran down to find Jarvis waiting in the hall, a raincoat over his evening splendour.

"Thank God that airstrip has proper electric lighting now," she said as they got into the car. "We'd never have kept the tapers alight in this wind and rain."

At last the airstrip came into sight, already lit up. They hurried in and found Lonnie stretched on the floor, a hat beneath his head. He was groaning weakly, and his face had the grey colour Morag had learned to associate with death. Dr. Tindall looked up as he entered.

"If they don't get here soon, he hasn't a chance," he said.

For the moment she was shaken out of her professional detachment. This wasn't just a patient. This was Lonnie, whose cheerful fecklessness had enlivened Brannock as long as she could remember.

"It's coming!" someone called. "The plane!"

Everyone crowded out to watch the lights of the little Islander, almost invisible through the rain, coming closer. The wind was tossing the plane round like a feather. It descended shakily, seemed to hover over the landing strip, then made a sudden dive, too late. It hit the strip too close to the end, rose, landed again and slewed round violently, crashing into the double doors of the hangar. The next second everyone was running across the rain-lashed tarmac.

The pilot and nurse regained consciousness almost at once, but both were clearly in a daze. Morag, preoccupied with helping them out of the plane and into shelter, didn't notice that her husband was no longer with her.

"The plane's damaged," she told Dr. Tindall as he took a hasty look at his new patients. "And even if it wasn't—I don't think these two are seriously hurt, but they're in no state to fly."

He turned his head sharply. "What's that noise?"

Morag went outside to see the source of the commotion and found the crowd engaged in dragging the plane away from the hangar doors. Jarvis, lashed by rain, was directing operations.

He turned as he saw her running towards him. "Tell the doctor that we'll do the flight in the Learjet," he shouted above the storm.

He gave her a sharp look and Morag dived into the crippled Islander. She seized the nurse's bag full of drugs, bandages and equipment and, with someone's help, shifted the stretcher to the Learjet.

Morag ran back to the building where Lonnie was lying, still alive but only just. Jarvis followed her inside.

"We're ready for him," she told Dr. Tindall. "I'll give him a shot just before we take off."

Jarvis seized Morag's arm. "Do you imagine that I'm going to let you go on this journey?"

She stared at him. "Lonnie *has* to have someone to look after him. You can see the state he's in, and that nurse has a concussion. I've done this job before."

"Let Dr. Tindall go."

"His job is here, caring for that nurse and pilot. Mine is up there, doing what I was trained to do. You can't stop me. If you tried, everyone here would be against you forever."

He looked at her wildly. "That doesn't matter," he yelled. "There's every chance you'll crash and be killed. Do you think I'm going to risk that just so that Brannock can say what a fine fellow I am?"

She shook her head and put her hands on his shoulders. "I'm going."

He didn't move at first. Then abruptly he wrenched himself out of her grasp and strode out the door. The darkness swallowed him up at once.

Moments later she could make out the Learjet. She went out, climbed aboard and turned at once to guide the stretcher in. She had filled the syringe and plunged the needle into Lonnie's arm. His eyes closed almost at once.

"Tell me as soon as you're ready," came a voice from the pilot's seat, causing her head to jerk up.

"Jarvis!"

Till that moment she had not looked at the man sitting there and only now realized that it was her husband. As the door was slamming shut, she heard a shout from outside.

"*Himself is flying the plane!*"

Jarvis was taking the plane to the end of the runway, his whole attention absorbed by the task in hand. He

slipped the headphones on and peered out at the tarmac.

"Hold on to something," he yelled, "and brace yourself."

The little plane shot forward, gaining speed with every yard. There was a lurch, and they were airborne. Morag flattened herself on the floor next to Lonnie and flung a protective arm across him. Her ear was against the floor, and the vibrations seemed to thunder right through her.

The storm attacked them like an enemy. She had flown in storms before, but never one like this. Jarvis had said they probably wouldn't make it, and now she knew he was right.

She had the sensation of falling at terrifying speed. Then she felt herself jerked into the air.

They were yawing about the sky again and she was clinging on for dear life. Then, after what seemed an eternity, she felt, rather than heard, the note of the engine change; they were losing height, going steadily down and down....

"Jarvis!" she screamed.

"Just hold on another few minutes," he yelled back.

In another moment there was a heavy bump and the plane's movement changed, slowed, stopped.

Only then did she realise that they had landed. Over her head she was aware of Jarvis reaching from the pilot seat to open the door so that the ground ambulance crew could climb in. He wrenched open his seat belt and flung himself down beside Morag. He pulled her up sharply into a sitting position and drew her against himself kneeling beside her.

"Can you get to the old man now?" he said.

"Leave him to us, sir," said a male voice from somewhere overhead.

"Is he still alive?" she whispered.

"He's breathing," said the same voice. "He's got a chance."

There was an orderly commotion, the stretcher being lifted and guided gently out of the plane. Morag remained leaning against Jarvis. Her brain was coming back to life, clamouring with questions.

"Why, Jarvis?" she said, looking up at him. "Why?"

He put one hand on each side of her face and looked down at her.

"The world has no meaning to me without you. That's how much I love you." He bent his head and kissed her for a long heart-stopping moment.

He loved her. In her heart she had known it, but there was still a special joy in hearing him say the words. She managed to move frozen lips enough to kiss him back.

"They've accepted you," she said happily. "Did you hear what they said before we took off? *'Himself is flying the plane.'* Now you'll have everything you want."

"Everything I want is right here," he said, tightening his arms. "You're all that matters—as long as *you* accept me and promise never to go away. Stay with me always, Morag. I won't ask for

much, just as long as you're there. I can love enough for both of us."

She stared at him, puzzled. And then, as if someone had ripped a curtain aside, she saw what had been staring her in the face all the time. He believed that rivals could fear and hate him for his power, that women could pursue him for his money and sexual skill. But he could not believe that anyone could find him lovable as a man—even his wife.

She began to see that it would be a gigantic task to make him understand the truth, and that it might take all their lives.

With Jarvis's help, she managed to climb out of the plane. The wind had dropped, and in the distance the lights of the main airport buildings gleamed invitingly.

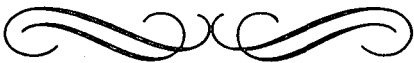
"Do you know what I think?" she said softly. "I think I should like to have our first baby as soon as possible."

"But the hospital isn't nearly ready."

"No, my love, but we are."

She took his hand and began to lead him to where the warmth and light beckoned them.

**Solution to
CROSSWORD #13
Vol. 3 No. 1**



F	O	G	A	D	A	M	S	O	W	S
A	R	E	G	A	L	A	E	M	I	L
T	E	N	D	E	R	L	Y	N	I	N
	T	O	N	E		T	A	S	T	E
P	I	L	O	T		P	I	L	E	
A	V	E	R		A	M	P		B	I
P	A	S	S		A	P	E		C	E
A	N	T		E	V	E			A	L
			D	Y	E	R		P	R	I
D	E	A	R	E	R		S	A	G	E
R	I	C	E		A	P	P	R	O	V
A	R	T	S		G	A	I	T		E
M	E	S	S		E	R	N	S		D

STAR SIGNS—JULY & AUGUST



CANCER June 22–July 22

Day-to-day communications could prove difficult at times. Your mood swings are the main cause of the problem; however, your partner and friends should be more than keen to keep the peace, so curb your temper. Toward the end of July a more harmonious atmosphere will prevail.



LEO July 23–August 22

Financial matters and affairs of the heart are closely linked. You may have to make a decision and be strong about it, despite the insistence of others. News arrives that could lead to a family celebration and the possibility of travel.



VIRGO August 23–September 22

Travel and romance linked or separated are both well aspected, and this month could prove to be an exciting and happy time. The only cautionary note is not to overdo things as your health could suffer.



LIBRA September 23–October 22

Interesting changes are in the air, and they may happen at breathtaking speed. If you stay calm and allow others to help you, you could be amazed at what you have achieved by the end of this whirlwind period.



SCORPIO October 23–November 22

It's a great time for close relationships, especially around the home front. With all the goodwill that's around, any changes that need to be made should go smoothly and make the future seem that little bit brighter.



SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

You are going to need infinite patience in order to sort out problems that may arise around the beginning of July. Travel plans are well aspected and it could be that by getting away, the problems closer to home fade, or at least a solution seems possible.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Time to stop chasing your tail and admit to your mistakes. A certain person would be only too willing to help, if allowed. Finances pick up and you could be enjoying a mini spending spree or planning some changes to the home environment.



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

Rely on your own intuition rather than on the voices of others; that way, you will be sure of your own intentions. A new venture or a change of direction at work is possible. This could make you feel more confident about your future prospects.



PISCES February 23–March 22

Recent changes that caused you to feel unsettled should now be receding and the promise of a more settled time is in the stars. Someone could make you feel very special and it could lead to you making a stronger commitment. The period ends with you in a more positive and happier frame of mind.



ARIES March 23–April 22

You'll need all that Arian assertiveness to get what you want out of life as people may seem to be deliberately building obstacles for you. Despite these tensions there are many good things happening for you, too. A relationship could take on new meaning or someone could pleasantly surprise you.



TAURUS April 23–May 22

Your love life could receive a boost and people may surprise you by their actions. Children or pets could cause you concern and it may lead to you canceling plans at the last minute. A good time to take up a new hobby or try out a new sport.



GEMINI May 23–June 21

Take care of finances before they get out of hand and try not to rely too heavily on other people's help as this could lead to tensions. A family reunion or gathering could provide the high point of July and there could be some interesting news.

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

**HARLEQUIN
WORLD'S BEST**

Romances

ADAM'S IMAGE • Debbie Macomber

DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE... To all the world, Susan McKenzie, successful romance editor, seemed to be the perfect heroine. But there was one thing missing in her life, and that was the perfect hero. Then she met Dr. Adam Gallagher, and he seemed to fit the role perfectly. But Adam didn't seem to want to play the hero's role!

WINTER'S BOUNTY • Muriel Jensen

BECKONING HER HEART WAS THE WARMTH OF WINTER'S BOUNTY... The Christmas reunion in Astoria, Oregon, was a boisterous gathering of love in many forms, but Marijane Westridge was a stranger to all of them. At least until she looked at James Sullivan's love for his adopted son and beheld a kindred spirit.

**Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!**

READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #13

ACROSS

1. Low-lying cloud
4. Actor West
8. Female hogs
12. "We ____ the World"
13. Celebration
14. Pianist Gilels
15. Lovingly
17. Baseball team
18. Pitch
19. Sampled
21. Aviator
23. Heap
24. State positively
25. Elec. guitar attachment
26. Fragment
29. Go by
30. Gorilla
31. Yield
32. Aardvark's tidbit
33. Night before a holiday
34. Away from the weather
35. Fabric colorer
36. King of Troy
37. More precious
40. Sausage herb
41. Chinese staple
42. Okayed

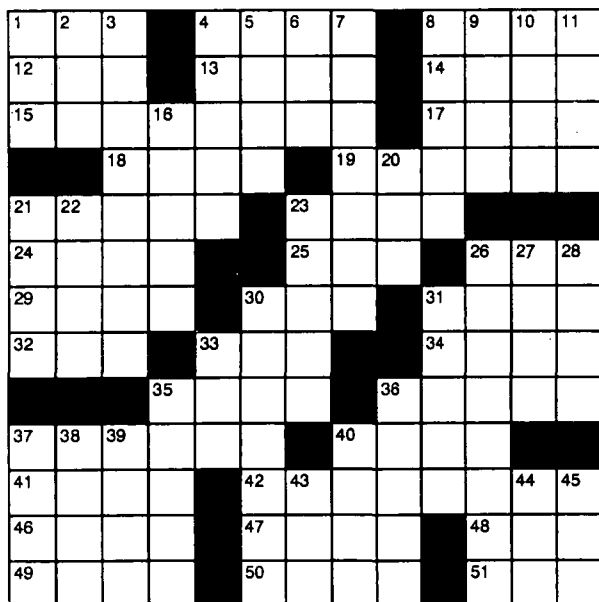
46. ____ and crafts
47. Manner of walking
48. Period in history
49. Disorder
50. Aquatic fliers
51. Parched

DOWN

1. Hefty
2. Lode load
3. Tamest
4. Manager
5. Challenge
6. Everybody
7. Romberg

- operetta
8. Meaning
9. Leave out
10. Claret, e.g.
11. Snow coaster
16. Portals
20. Swiss peak
21. Father
22. Terrible tsar
23. Wrapping material
26. Had faith
27. Notion
28. Abound
30. Typical number
31. Freight
33. Organ of sight
35. Frock
36. Portions
37. Small drink
38. Republic of Ireland
39. Performs on stage
40. Make thread
43. Golf norm
44. Be wrong
45. Time of light

Solution on page 141 of this issue.



HARLEQUIN WORLD'S BEST

Romances

JoANN ROSS—Risky Pleasure

When her estranged grandfather died and left his reputable California farm to her, Blair MacKenzie thought her lifelong dream to own a stable of horses had come true. She hadn't counted on Clint Hollister, the attractive horse trainer. Nor had Blair counted on nearly being killed by the toss of a pitchfork. In fact, nothing was as it seemed at Clearwater Hills Farm . . .

NAN RYAN—Love in the Air

Five years ago Kay Clark and Sullivan Ward were Denver's hottest radio duo—both on and off the air. But when Kay left the city—and Sullivan—to work in L.A., their untried romance fell apart. Then Kay returned to Denver to work with Sullivan again. And found, much to her dismay, that the old electric magic was back, and not just in the control room!

MARY LYNN BAXTER—Shared Moments

He was the devil in disguise: Kace McCord, the silver-haired client Courtney Roberts tried to keep at arm's length. But the New Orleans building tycoon took possession of her from the first. Too quickly, he aroused feelings she thought were dead. Betrayal had left its bitter mark, but her treacherous heart, so easily seduced, took one last wild gamble on love.

LUCY GORDON—Island of Dreams

When hard-edged businessman Jarvis Dacre bought Morag Lewis's beloved Scottish birthplace of Brannock Island and promised to begin "improving" it immediately, Morag resolved to do whatever was necessary to protect it. She accepted his cold-blooded, businesslike marriage proposal for the sake of her family and friends. But could Morag's beloved island become Jarvis's paradise too?